EMBLEMS OF LOVE

BY

LASCELLES ABERCROMBIE

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EMBLEMS OF LOVE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

INTERLUDES AND POEMS

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EMBLEMS OF LOVE

DESIGNED IN SEVERAL DISCOURSES

BY LASCELLES ABERCROMBIE

" Wonder it is to see in diverse mindes
How diversly love doth his pageaunts play"

" Ego tamquam centrum circuli, cui simili modo
se habent circumferentiæ partes"

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TO
MY WIFE

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EMBLEMS OF LOVE

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HYMN TO LOVE

We are thine, O Love, being in thee and made of thee,
As thóu, Lóve, were the déep thóught
And we the speech of the thought; yea, spoken are we,
Thy fires of thought out-spoken:

But burn'd not through us thy imagining
Like fiérce móod in a sóng cáught,
We were as clamour'd words a fool may fling,
Loose words, of meaning broken.

For what more like the brainless speech of a fool,—
The lives travelling dark fears,
And as a boy throws pebbles in a pool
Thrown down abysmal places?

Hazardous are the stars, yet is our birth
And our journeying time theirs;
As words of air, life makes of starry earth
Sweet soul-delighted faces;

As voices are we in the worldly wind;
The great wind of the world's fate
Is turned, as air to a shapen sound, to mind
And marvellous desires.

But not in the world as voices storm-shatter'd,
Not borne down by the wind's weight;
The rushing time rings with our splendid word
Like darkness filled with fires.

For Love doth use us for a sound of song,
And Love's meaning our life wields,
Making our souls like syllables to throng
His tunes of exultation.

Down the blind speed of a fatal world we fly,
As rain blown along earth's fields;
Yet are we god-desiring liturgy,
Sung joys of adoration;

Yea, made of chance and all a labouring strife,
We go charged with a strong flame;
For as a language Love hath seized on life
His burning heart to story.

Yea, Love, we are thine, the liturgy of thee,
Thy thought's golden and glad name,
The mortal conscience of immortal glee,
Love's zeal in Love's own glory.

PART I

DISCOVERY AND PROPHECY

PRELUDE

Night on bleak downs; a high grass-grown trench runs athwart the slope. The earthwork is manned by warriors clad in hides. Two warriors, BRYS *and* GAST, *talking.*

Gast.

This puts a tall heart in me, and a tune
Of great glad blood flowing brave in my flesh,
To see thee, after all these moons, returned,
My Brys. If there's no rust in thy shoulder-joints,
That battle-wrath of thine, and thy good throwing,
Will be more help for us than if the dyke
Were higher by a span.—Ha! there was howling
Down in the thicket; they come soon, for sure.

Brys.

Has there been hunger in the forest long?

Gast.

I think, not only hunger makes them fierce:
They broke not long since into a village yonder,
A huge throng of them; all through the night we heard
The feasting they kept up. And that has made
The wolves blood-thirsty, I believe.

Brys.

O fools
To keep so slack a waking on their dykes!
Now have they made a sleepless winter for us.
Every night we must look, lest the down-slope
Between us and the woods turn suddenly
To a grey onrush full of small green candles,
The charging pack with eyes flaming for flesh.
And well for us then if there's no more mist
Than the white panting of the wolfish hunger.

Gast.

They'll come to-night. Three of us hunting went
Among the trees below: not long we stayed.
All the wolves of the world are in the forest,
And man's the meat they're after.

Brys.

Ay, it must be
Blood-thirst is in them, if they come to-night,
Such clear and starry weather.—What dost thou make,
Gast, of the stars?

Gast.

Brother, they're horrible.
I always keep my head as much as I may
Bent so they cannot look me in the eyes.

Brys.

I never had this awe. The fear I have
Is not a load I crouch beneath, but something
Proud and wonderful, that lifteth my heart.

Yea, I look on a night of stars with fear
That comes close against glee. 'Tis like the fear
I have for the wolves, that maketh me joy-mad
To drive the yellow flint-edge through their shags.
So when I gaze on stars, they speak high fear
Into my soul; and strangely I think they mean
The fear must prompt me to some unknown war.

Gast.

Be thou well ware of this. I have not told thee
How the stars, with their perilous overlooking,
Have raught away from all his manhood Gwat,
Our fiercest strength. For when the conquering wolves
Into that village won, we in our huts
Lay hearkening to their rejoicing hunger;
But Gwat stayed out in the stars all night long.
I peered at him as much as that whipt dog,
My heart, had daring for; and he stood stiff,
With all his senses aiming at the noise.
Some strong bad eagerness kept tightly rigged
The cordage of his body, till his nerves
Loosed on a sudden. He yelled, "What do we here,
High up among bleak winds, always afraid
Of murder from the wolves? I will be man
No more; the grey four-footed fellows have
The good meats of the world, and the best lodging,
Forest and weald." And then he wolfish howled,
And hurled off towards the snarling and the baying.
And now his soul wears the strength and fury
Of a huge dun-pelted wolf; he's the wolves' king;
And the fiends have learnt from him to laugh at our flints.
Now always in the assaults there's one great beast,

With yellow eyes and hackles like a mane,
That plays the captain, first to reach the dyke;
And I have heard that when he stands upright
To ramp against the bulwarks, in his throat
Are chattering yelps half tongued to grisly words.
Doubtless to-night thou'lt see him, leading his pack,
And with his jaws savagely tampering
With our earth-builded safety.—But now, Brys,
Is it not certain that the stars have done
This evil to Gwat's heart, and curdled all
The manhood in him?

Brys.

When I was wanderer,
I came upon a lake, set in a land
Which has no fear of wolves. A fisher folk
Live there in houses stilted over the water,
And the stars walk like spectres of white fire
Upon the misty waters of the mere.
Ay, if they have no wolves, they have the fear
All as thou hast; the sedges in the night
Shudder, and out of the reeds there comes a cry
Half chuckling, half bewailing; but, as I think,
It is the mallard calling. Now among
This haunted folk, I markt a man who went
With shining eyes, and a joy in his face, about
His needs of living. Clear it was to me
He knew of some sweet race in his daily wont
Which blest him wonderly. I lived with him,
And from him learnt marvels. Yea, for he gave me
A wit to see in our earth more than fear.
Brother, how shall I tell thee, who hast still

Fear-poisoned nerves, that like a priest he brewed
My heart keen drink from out the look of earth?—
Gast, is it nothing to thee that all in green
The wolds go heaping up against the blue?
And is it only fear to thee that night
Is thatched with stars?—Ah, but I took his wit
Further than he e'er did; in women I found
The same amazement for my wakened eyes
As in the hills and waters. Ay, gape at me,
And think me bitten by some evil tooth;
But as a quiet stream at the cliff's edge
Breaks its smooth habit into a loud white force,
So this delight the earth pours over me
Leaps out of women with such excellence,
It seems as I must brace my sinews to it,—
The comely fashion of their limbs, their eyes,
Their gait, and the way they use their arms. And now
My eyes have a message to my heart from them
Such as thou only through a blind skin hast.
Therefore I came back here;—I scarce know why,
But now that women are to me not only
The sacred friends of hidden Awe, not only
Mistresses of the world's unseen foison,
Ay, and not only ease for throbbing groins,
But things mine eyes enjoy as mine ears take songs,
Vision that beats a timbrel in my blood,
Dreams for my sleeping sight, that move aired round
With wonder, as trembling covers a hearth,—
It seems I must be fighting for them, must
Run through some danger to them now before
Delighting in them. I am here to fight
Wolves for the joy of the world, marvellous women!

Gast.

Star-madden'd ! What is this in earth and women
That pricks thee into wrath against the wolves ?
Do I not fight for women too ? But I
For what is certain in them, not for madness.

Brys.

I make my fierceness of a mind to set
My spirit high up in the winds of joy,
Before I tumble down into the darkness.
Not thus thy women send thee to thy fighting :
All fear thy battle-courage is, fear-bred
Thine anger. Thou heavily drudgest women,
But yet thou art afraid of them.

Gast.

Ay, truly ;
For look how from their wondrous bodies comes
Increase : who knoweth where such power ends ?
They are in league with the great Motherhood
Who brings the seasons forth in the open world ;
And if to them She hands, unseen by us,
Their marvellous bringing forth of children, what
Spirit of Her great dreadful mountain-spell,
Wherein the rocks have purpose against us,
Sealed up in watchful quiet stone, may not
Pass on to their dark minds, that seem so mild,
Yet are so strange ; or what charm'd word from out
Her forests whispering endless dangerous things,
Wherefrom our hunters often have run crazed
To hear the trees devising for their souls ;

What secret share of Her earth's monstrous power
May She not also grant to women's lives ?
Yea, wise is our fear of women ; but we fight
For more than fear ; we give them liking too.
Who but the women can deliver us
From this continual siege of the wolves' hunger ?
High above comfort, on the shrugging backs
Of downland, where the winds parch our skins, and frost
Kneads through our flesh until his fingers clamp
The aching bones, our scanty families
Hold out against the ravin of the wolves,
Fended by earthwork, fighting them with flint.
But if we keep the favour of our women,
They will breed sons to us so many and strong
We shall have numbers that will make us dare
Invade the weather-shelter'd woods, and build
Villages where now only wolves are denn'd ;
Yea, to the beasts shall the man-folk become
Malice that haunts their ways, even as now
Our leaguer'd tribes must lurk and crouch afraid
Of wolfish malice always baying near.
And fires, stackt hugely high with timber, shall
With nightlong blaze make friendly the dark and cold,
Cheer our bodies, and roast great feasts of flesh,—
Ah, to burn trunks of trees, not bracken and ling !
This is what women are to me,—a fear
Lest the earth-hidden Awe, who unseen gives
The childing to their flesh, should make their minds
As darkly able as their wombs, with power
To think sorceries over us ; and hope
That with their breeding they will dispossess
The beasts of the good lowlands, until man,

No longer fled to the hills, inhabit all
The comfort of the earth.

Brys.

These are mine too,
But as great rivers own the brook's young speed.
For in my soul, the women do not dwell
A torch going through darkness, with a troop
Of shadows gesturing after ; but as the sun
Upon his height of golden blaze at noon,
With all the size of the blue air about him.
Fear that in women the unseen is seen
And the unknown power sits beside us known,—
This fear is good, but better is than this
Their beauty, and the wells of joy in women.
I speak dumb words to thee ; but know thou, Gast,
My soul is looking at the time to come,
And seeing it not as a cavern lit
With smoky burning brandons of thy fear,
But as a day shining with my new joy.
Thou canst not fight with me for the coming heart
Of man,—fear cannot fight with joy. And I
Am setting such a war of joy against thee,
It shall be as man's heart became a god
Murdering thy mind of weakling darkness.
All the hot happiness of being wroth
And seeing a stroke leave behind it wound,
The pleasures of wily hunting, and a feast
After long famine, and the dancing stored
Within the must of berries,—these, and all
Gladdenings that make thrill the being of man
Shall pour, mixt with an unknown rage of glee,

Into the meaning men shall find in women.
And if we have at all a fear of them,
It shall not be the old ignorant dismay,
But of their very potency to delight,
The way their looks make Will an enemy
Hating itself, shall men become afraid.
Women shall cause men know for why they have
Being in the earth ;—not to be quailing slack
As if the whole world were a threat, but tuned
Ready for joy as harp-strings for the player.
And great desire of beauty and to be glad
Shall prompt our courages. Ha, what are those
Breaking from out the thickets ?

Gast.

Wolves ! They come !
Brothers, the fiends are on us : have good hearts !
Ho for the women and their sacred wombs !

Brys.

Ho for the women, their beauty and my pleasure !

VASHTI

I

AHASUERUS AND VASHTI

Vashti.

My lord requires me here.

Ahasuerus.

Does Heaven see this ?
Dare I have this one humble unto me ?
Was it not enough, Stars, to have given me
This marriage ? but you must persuade your God
To have me as well the greatest king beneath you !
Look you now if men grow not insolent
Because of me, a man so throned, so wived.
Yea, and in me insolent groweth my love ;
For if the wheels of the careering world
Brake, felley and spoke, that, pitching on the road,
It spilt the driving godhead from his seat,
And the unreined team of hours riskily dragg'd
Their crippled duty,—if in that lurching world
Like jarrèd glass my power shattered about me,
And I were a head unking'd, 'twere but a game,
So I were left possessing thee, and that

Escape from Heaven, the beauty that goes with thee.
Here is an insolence ! Hast thou not wonder'd,
Vashti, what gave thee into such a love,
That in the brain of me, the chosen king,
It is so loud, so insolent, thy love ?
O this shrill sweet heart-mastering love !

Vashti.

Alas,
Do I deserve that love ?—But yes, I wonder ;
For what am I that the king loveth me ?
Lo, I am woman, thou art man, the lord ;
Out of mere bounty are we loved of you,
And not for our deserving. We are to sit
In a high calm, and not go down and help
Among the toil, and choosing, chosen, find
Companionship therein. For thou, for man
Has such a treasure in his heart of love,
It must be squandered out in charity,
Not used as a gentle money to repay
Worth (as a woman spends her love). A trick
Of posture in a girl, and see the alms
Of generous love man will enrich her with !
Might there not be sometimes too much of alms
About his love ? But we will blink at that.
Yet sometimes we are liked ashamed, to be
Taking so much love from you, all for naught.
Now therefore tell me, Man, my king, my master :
Lovest thou me, or dost thou rather love
The pleasure thou hast in me ? This is not nice,
Believe me. They're more sundered, these two loves,
Than if all the braving seas marcht between them.

Ahasuerus.

What, shrinking from thine own delightsomeness ?
Hear then. Nature, so ordered from the God,
Has given strength to man and work to do,
But to woman gave that she should be delight
For man, else like an overdriven ox
Heart-broke. The world was made for man, but made
Wisely a steep difficulty to be climbed,
That he, so labouring the stubborn slant,
May step from off the world with a well-used courage,
All slouch disgrace fought out of him, a man
Well worthy of a Heaven. And this great part
Has woman in the work ; that man, fordone
And wearied, may find lodging out of the noise
Upon her breast, and looking in her eyes
May wash in pools of kindness, fresh as Heaven,
The soil of sweat and trouble from his limbs ;
And turning aside into this pleasant inn
Called woman, there is entertainment kept
For man, such that for cheating craftily
The stabled palter'd heart that it can pass
Through the world's grillage and be large as fate,
The sweet anxiety of reeded pipes
Is a mere thing to it. Like Heaven street
When the steel of God's army surges through it,
Bright anger burning on an errand of swords,
So is the sense of man when woman-joy
Pours through his flesh a throng of deity,
White clamorous flame ; yea, desire of woman
Maketh the mind of more room for amazement
Than that blue loft hath for the light, more charged

With spiritual joy that goes in stress
As far as tears, with this more throbbingly charged
Than the starr'd night wept full of silver fires,—
Dangerously endured, labours of joy!
Is it not virtuous, not powerful, this?
Wouldst thou have more? Man knows he can possess
Than woman's beauty nought more treasurable.
And high above our loud activities
We keep, pure as the dawn, the house of love,
Woman, wherein we entering leave outside
Our rank sweat-drenchèd weeds of toil, and there
Enjoy ourselves, out of the world, awhile.

Vashti (*aside*).

O yes, I know. Filthiness! Filthiness!

Ahasuerus.

Now here have I been toiling under press
Of glory. Should I not stumble in my gait,
Were there no Vashti, and with her a welcome
I do not need to buy, since all she wants
Is that I love her? Going in unto her
I may unstrap my burdenous pack of kingship,
Shift me of reign, and escape my splendour.
Yea, and strange largeness in this power of love
For men too much limited! Now I am sick
Of knowing my greatness, now I want to be
Placed where my soul can feel vast room about me,
To be contained. Outside, among the men,
I am the room of the world; I and my rule
Contain the world; and I am sick thereof.
Vashti can remedy this; for here thy beauty

More spacious is for my senses to be in,
Than his own golden kingdom for the sun.

Vashti.

Thine eyes are glad with me? I please the King?

Ahasuerus.

Eyes? But there is no nerve thou takest not,
No way of my life thronging not with thee,
And my blood sounds at the story of thy beauty.
What thing shall be held up to woman's beauty?
Where are the bounds of it? Yea, what is all
The world, but an awning scaffolded amid
The waste perilous Eternity, to lodge
This Heaven-wander'd princess, woman's beauty?
The East and West kneel down to thee, the North
And South, and all for thee their shoulders bear
The load of fourfold place. As yellow morn
Runs on the slippery waves of the spread sea,
Thy feet are on the griefs and joys of men
That sheen to be thy causey. Out of tears,
Indeed, and blitheness, murder and lust and love,
Whatever has been passionate in clay,
Thy flesh was tempered. Behold in thy body
The yearnings of all men measured and told,
Insatiate endless agonies of desire
Given thy flesh, the meaning of thy shape!
What beauty is there, but thou makest it?
How is earth good to look on, woods and fields
The seasons' garden, and the courageous hills,
All this green raft of earth moored in the seas?

The manner of the sun to ride the air,
The stars God has imagined for the night?
What's this behind them, that we cannot near,
Secret still on the point of being blabbed,
The ghost in the world that flies from being named?
Where do they get their beauty from, all these?
They do but glaze a lantern lit for man,
And woman's beauty is the flame therein
Feeding on sacred oil, man's desire,
A golden flame possessing all the earth.
Or as a queen upon an embassage
From out some mountain-guarded far renown,
Brings caravans stockt from her slavish mines,
Her looms and forges, with a precious friendship;
So comest thou from the chambers of the stars
On thy famed visit unto man the king;
So bringing from the mints and shops of Heaven,
Where thou didst own labours of all the fates,
A shining traffic, all that man calls beauty:
There is no holding out for the heart of man
Against thee and such custom. O hard to be borne,
Often hard to be borne is woman's beauty!—
And well I guess it does but cover up
Enmity, hanging falseness between our souls,
And buy at a dishonest price the mouth
True nature hath for thee, to speak thee fair.
Were not man's thought so gilded with thy beauty,
Woman, and caught in the desire of thee,
O, there'ld be hatred in his use of thee.
You should be thankful for your pleasantness!

Vashti.

Yes, I am thankful. For I hope, my lord,
We women know our style. Ay, we are fooled
Sometimes with heady tampering thoughts, that come
To bother our submission, I confess.
We to ourselves have said, that when God took
The fierce beginning of the unwrought world
From out his fiery passion, and, breathing cool,
Tamed the wild molten being, with his hands
Fashion'd and workt the hot clay into world,
Then with green mercy quieted the land
And claspt it with the summer of blue seas,
With brooches of white spray along the shores,—
It was to be an equal dwelling-place
For humans that he did it, into sex
Unknowably dividing human kind.
But wickedly we say this. God made man
For his delight and praise, and then made woman
For man's delight and praise, submiss to man.
Else wherefore sex ? And it is better thus,
To be man's pleasure. What noble work is ours,
To have our bodies proper for your love,
The means of your delight ! Ay, and minds too,
Sometimes ; we think, we women think we know
What shape of mind pleases our masters best,
And that we build up in us. A tender shyness,
A coy reluctancy,—we use these well.
Man is our master ; it is best for us
Persuading him line our captivity
With wool-soft love, lest it be bitter iron.

Ahasuerus.

This is the marvel's head, that thou, so fair,
And loved by me, should keep so good a mind.
——They shall not see thee, when I display at large
The riches and the honour; I've enough
Possession, without thee, to stupify
The assembly of my men, my herd of kings.
I mean there shall not be a hint of doubt
About whose world this is. So I have bid,
From all the utter regions of my land,
The kings whom I allow to rule, who breathe
My air, to feast with me and for a while
Flatter their trivial lives with a brief relish
Of being king of the world's kings in Shushan.
Yea, and I will dismay their wits with splendour;
No noise shall be against me in the world.
I am more open, kinder than Lord God,
Who never shows how much he has of thunder;
Wherefore against him men presume, and go
Often out of his ways extravagant.
But all the fear I keep obedient by me
Now to the gather'd world I openly shew.
So God is spoken against, I am never,
And I have a better terror in the world;
And chiefly for the happiness built round me
Divinely firm. O all the kings, my men,
Shall fear this terrible happiness of mine!
But thee I will not shew; I'll have some wealth
Not public. I'll have no adulteries,
No eyes but mine enjoying thee. To me
The sight of thee, all as the touch of thee,

Belongeth, only my pleasure thou art:
None but my senses shall come unto thee,
And I will keep my pleasure pure as Heaven.
Happy art thou, Vashti, to have wedded
One who so dearly rates possession of thee.
Better it is to spend my heart on thee
Than on any of the women that I have.

II

THE FEAST OF KINGS: MIDNIGHT

Ahasuerus.

You kings, you thrones that burn about the world,
Whom yet I king, lifted higher above you
Than you are lifted up above your folks:
This is my day. I have agreed with Heaven,
My fellow in the fear of the world, to have
This day unshar'd; and it is all mine,
All that the Gods from baseless fires and steams
Have harden'd into the place and kind of the world:
The great high quiet journey of the stars,
And all the golden hours which the sun
Utters aloft in heaven;—the whole is mine
To fill with ceremonies of my throne.
This one day, I am where Heaven and I
Commonly stand together; you shall not have
Shelter from me in a worshipt God to-day,
Kings; look yonder at many-power'd night,
Telling her beauty to the sea and taking
The prone adoring waters into her blue

Desire, setting them as herself on flame
With perils of joy, lending them her achieved
Raptures, her white experiences of stars.
So shall your souls lie under me these hours;
As they were waters shall they be beneath
My burning, set alight with me, and none
Escape from utterly understanding me
And why I am so kindled in my soul.
  Who has been like to me? My name travels
A hundred seven and twenty languages,
My name a ship upon them, trading fear.
My unseen power weighs upon the heads
Of nations, like the blown abasement given
By sedges when they are wretched to the wind.
Ay, and the farthest goings of the air
Can reach no land my taxes do not labour.
The fear of me is the conscience of the world.
Ahasuerus is a region large
As there is light upon the earth; when dawn
With golden duties celebrates the sun,
It does but serve to fetch the lives I own
Out of shadow flinching into the light,—
Out of sleep's mercy the sore lives that know
Only a penal sun, that are so chapt
In winds of my sent spirit: I care not, I.
For as my flesh out of my father's joy
Came, fraught from him with hunger for like joy,—
As, when roused ages of desire within me
Play with my blood as storms play with the sea,
And all my senses tug one way like sails,
My flesh obeys, and into that perilous dream,
Woman, exults;—so, but much more, my soul,

That had its faculties from far beyond
The tingling loam of flesh, obeys a need :
Conquest, and nations to enjoy with war.
For 'tis a need that rode down out of God
Upon my journeying soul into this world's
Affairs, like smouldering fire besiegers throw
Among a city's roofs, which cannot choose
But take blaze from the whole town's timber ; so
My soul's desire for flame hath charred the world.
Till now, as the night full of perfect fires,
I, full of conquests, am large over you.
And you must be like waters underneath me,
Full of my burning ; there's no more for me
Now, but to dwell alone in my still soul's
Hoarding of ecstasies, a great place of lusts
Achieved and shining fixt ; for every man
Is mine, and every soil is mine, from here
Round to the furthest cliffs that steadfast are
To keep the hoofs of the sea from murdering
The tilled leagues of the land. And by the coasts
I am not kept. Far into the room of waters,
Into the blue middle of ocean's summer,
The white gait of my sea-going war invades.
I have a man here, one who makes with words,
And he shall be my messenger to your hearts.
Not to make much of me ; but he's the speech
Of Spirit,—I the dangerous exultation,
The Spirit's sacred joy in wrath against
The heaps of its own spent kinds, melting anew
To found in another image of itself.
He is the man to shew you, withinside
The flashing and exclaim of my great moving

About the places of the world; within
The heat of my pleasure that has molten down,
Like ingots in a furnace, all your nations
Into my likeness treading on the earth;
Within the smokes that make your eyes pour grief,
This gleam of infinite purpose quietly nested,—
That I am given the world, and that my pleasure
Is plain the latest word spoken by God.
So while our senses go among these wines,
Wander in green deliciousness and crimson,
And fragrance searches the else-unsearchable brain,
Poet, tell out the glory of the king.

The Poet.

The glory of the king of all the kings.—
You with the golden power on your brows,
You kings, I think you know not what you are.
First you shall learn yourselves: for neither light
Understandeth itself, nor darkness light.
You see your glory; but you cannot see
That which your glory conquers; and the peoples
Know nought but that the glooming of their night
Maketh a shining scope for crowns, as he,
Even as he, your king, Ahasuerus,
Maketh your splendour a darkness for his light.
But I, neither belonging to the kings
Nor to the people, only I may know
The golden fortune of light anointing kings.
Come with me now, and take my vision awhile.
The people of this world are misery.
What doth Man here? How thinketh God on him?
Surely he was sent here as if thereby

God might forget him. Like infamous desire
A wise heart puts aside, which yet remains
A secret hated memory, man was
In God, and is vainly discarded here.
I see him coming here ; I see man's life
Falling into this base and desert ground,
This world that seems an evil riddance thrown
Down by the winds of God's swift purposes ;
Some shame of grossness, that would cling upon
The errand of their holy speed, and here
Heapt up and strewn into the place wherein
The mind and being of man wander darkly.
Behold him coming here !—Against my sight,
Warning aback the gleam of sacred heaven,
Is vast forbiddance raised ; creatures like hills,
Or darkness surging at the coasts of light,
Stand, a great barricade behind our lives,
Rankt as Eternity had put on stature.
The sharp sides of the peaks are finger'd white
With flame, lit by the fires of God beyond ;
The rest is night ; the whole people of dark hills
A front of high impenetrable doom.
But lo !
Black in the blackness, is a yawn in the doom,
And out of it flows the kind of man. Behold,
It is a river, through the permission sent
As through a snarling breakage in a cliff ;
Turned like a hated thing away from God ;
Spat out, the water of man's life, to spill
Down bleak gullies, and thrid the gangways dark
Through the reluctant hills, pouring as if
It knew God were ashamed of it. And thence,

Rejected down the abhorring steeps, man's life
Is wasted in this country, set to run
A blind, ignorant, unremembered course,
Treading with hopeless feet of griev'd waters
Unending unblest spaces, the shameful road
Of dirt thickening into slime its flow,
An insane weather driving. For at the issue,
Hovering mightily fledge to beat it on,
A climate of demon's wings o'erarches man,
The hatred God has sent pursuing him.
Fierce hawking spirits wrong him, hungry Cold,
Crazes of Fear and sickening Want, and huge
Injurious Darkness, lord of the bad wings
That pester all the places beyond God,—
These at the door, with lust to embody themselves,
Wait for the naked journey of man's life
To seize it into ache, ravenously.
They never leave, down all its patient way,
To meddle with its waters, till they be sour
As venom, salt as weeping, foully ailing
With foreign evil,—all the sort of desires
Whoring the shuddering life unto their lust.
Behold man's river now; it has travelled far
From that divine loathing, and it is made
One with the two main fiends, the Dark and Cold,
The faithful lovers of mankind. Behold,
Broad it is now become, a plenteous water,
A roomy tide. And lo, what oars are these?
To sweet sung measure rows what happy fleet,
With at the lifted prows banners of flame,
Bravely scaring the darkness to betray
The black embarasst flood sheared by the stems?

Behold, at last God for man's misery
Hath found excuse! Behold his wretchedness
Gilded at last with beauty pleasant to God!
No longer a useless grief is man's life now;
For floating on it, for enjoying it,
A state of barges goes, the state of kings.
They bring a day with them of many lamps,
And as they move, on the black slabbèd waters
Red wounds, and green, and golden, do they shoot
About them, beautiful cruelty of light;
And they throw music over the sounding river.
I too am walking on the sea of man;
I watch your singing and your lamps row past;
And under me I hear the river speaking,
The great blind water moaning to itself
For sorrow it was made. But in your blithe ships
Silverly chained with luxury of tune
Your senses lie, in a delicious gaol
Of harmony, hours of string'd enchantment.
Or if you wake your ears for the river's voice,
You hear the chime of fawning lipping water,
Trodden to chattering falsehood by the keels
Of kings' happiness. And what is it to you,
When strangely shudders the fabric of your navy
To feel the thrilling tide beneath it grieving;
Or when its timber drinks the river's mood,
The mighty mood of man's Despair, which runs
Like subtle electric blood through all the hulls,
And tips each masthead with a glimmering candle
Blue pale and flickering like a ghost? For you
Are too much lit to mark a corposant.
Nor yours the stale smell of the unhealthful stream,

Clotted with mud and sullen with its weeds,
Who carry your own air with you, blest sweet
And drencht with many scattered fragrances.
You, sailing in golden ignorance, know not
The anxious flow of life under your way :
Do you not miss half the wonder of you ?—
That so your happiness in the thought of God
Stands, that he open'd man's expense of grief
To give your oars unscrupulous room, to be
The buoyancy of your delighted barges,
Sliding with fortunate lanterns and with tunes
And odorous holiday, O kings, O you
The pleasure of God, richly, joyously launcht
On this kind sea, the tame sorrow of Man ?
You need poets to reckon your marvellousness——

Ahasuerus.

Where is he driving ? I set thee not to this ;
It was to tell what I, not what they, be.

Poet.

How can they know what thou art, if not first
I tell them what they are themselves, my king ?

Ahasuerus.

Thou hast a night, man, not a week to tell them.
You men of words, dealers in breath, conceit
Too bravely of yourselves ;—O I know why
You love to make man's life a villainous thing,
And pose his happiness with heavy words.
You mean to puff your craft into a likeness

Of what hath been in the great days of the Gods.
When Tiamat, the old foul worm from hell,
Lay coiled and nested in the unmade world,
All the loose stuff dragg'd with her rummaging tail
And packt about her belly in a form,
Where she could hutch herself and bark at Heaven,—
The god's bright soldier, Bel, fashioned a wind;
And when her jaws began her whining rage
Against him, into her guts he shot the wind
And rent the membranes of her life. So you
Wordmongers would be Bel to the life of man.
You like not that his will should heap the world
About him in a fumbled den of toil;
And set the strength of his spirit, not to joy,
But to laborious money; so you stand forth
And think with spoken wind to make such stir
And rumble in the inwards of man's life,
That he in a noble colic will leap up
Out of his cave of work and breathe sweet air.
You will not do it: man prefers his den.
Now leave mankind alone and sing of me.

Poet.

So; I will tell thy glory now aright.
I will not make it thy chief wonder, King,
That thou hast tied the world upon a rack;
Or that thy armies be so huge, the earth
Sways like a bridge of planks beneath their march,
And leagues about their way out of the ground
Like thunder comes the rumour of thy vengeance.
These be but shows of kingship; but one thing
Exclaims, inevitably as a word

Announced by God, thee first of the world's souls,—
That thou mayst have in thy arms Vashti the Queen.—
Princes, what looks are these ?
Why are your minds astonisht so unwisely ?
What, think you war the thing, or pompous fame ?
See if I speak not truth of love and woman.
You will have heard how lightning's struck a man,
Shepherd or wayfarer, and when they found
The branded corpse, the rayment was torn off,
Blown into tatters and strewn wide by that
Withering death, and he birth-naked stretcht :
Bethink you, is not that now very like
How woman smites your souls ? Whatever dress
Of thought you take to royalize your nature,—
Gorgeous shawls of kingship, a world's fear,
Or ample weavings of imagination,
Or the spun light of wisdom,—like a gust
Of flame, that weather of impersonal thought
You strut beneath, that hanging storm of Love,
Strikes down a terrible swift dazzling finger,
Sight of some woman, on your clothèd hearts,
And plucks the winding folly off, and leaves
Bare nature there. And hear another likeness.
Look, if the priests have made an altar-fire,
They can have any flame they list, as gums
Sprinkle the fluel, or salts, or curious earths,—
Tawny or purple, green, scarlet, or blue,
Or moted with an upward rain of sparks ;
But first there must be air, or else no fire :
Man's being is a fire lit unto God,
And many thoughts colour the sacred flame ;
But the air for him, the draught wherein he glows,

The breathing spirit that has turned mere life
Into the hot vehement being of man
Lambent upon the altar of the world,
Is woman and desire of her, nought else.
Behold, we know not what we do at all
When we love women : is it we who love,
Or Destiny rather visiting our souls
In passion ?—How shall I name thee what thou art,
Woman, thou dream of man's desire that God
Caught out of man's first sleep and fashioned real ?
Deliverance art thou from his own strait thought,
Wind come from beyond the stars
To blow away like mist all the disgrace
Of reasonable bars,
The forgery of time and place,
Whereinto soul was narrowly brought
When it was gridded close behind
The workings of man's mind.
But Woman comes to bless
With an immoderateness,
With a divine excess,
Lust of life and yearn of flesh,
Till there seems naught hindering our souls :
Else we should crawl along the years
Labour'd with measurable joys
No greater than our life,
Things carefully devised against tears ;
And as snails harden their sweat
To brittle safety, a carried shell,
So we might build out of our woe of toil
Serious delight.
But to see and hear and touch Woman

Breaks our shell of this accursed world,
And turns our measured days to measureless gleam.
Up in a sudden burning flares
The dark tent of nature pitched about our souls;
And light, like a stound of golden din,
A shadowless light like weather of infinite plains,
Light not narrowed into place,
Amazes the naked nerves of the soul;
And like the pouring of immortal airs
Out of a flowery season,
Over us blows the inordinate desire.—
  Ah, who from Hell did the wisdom bring
That would make life a formal thing?
Who has invented all the manner and wont,
The customary ways,
That harness into evil scales
Of malady our living?
But how they shrivel and craze
If love but glance on them!
And as a bowl of glass to shattering
Shivers at a sounding string,
The brittle glittering self of man
At beauty of Woman throbs apieces,
And seems into Eternity spilled
The being it contained.
Let it touch Woman and flesh becomes
Finer and more thrilled
Than air contrived in tune,
Lighter round the soul
Than flame is round burning.
She is God's bribery to man
That he the world endure,

His wage for carrying the weight of being.
Nay, she is rather the eternal lure
Out of form and things that end,
Out of all the starry snares,
Out of the trap of years,
Into measureless desire;
Lest man be satisfied with mind,—
Be never stung into self-hate
At crouching always in the crate
Of prudent knowledge round him wrought,
And so grow small as his own thought.
Kings, think of the woman's body you love best:
How the beloved lines twin and merge,
Go into rhyme and differ, swerve and kiss,
Relent to hollows or like yearning pout,—
Curves that come to wondrous doubt
Or smooth into simplicities;
Like a skill of married tunes
Curdled out of the air;
How it is all sung delivering magic
To your pent hamper'd souls!
I tell you, kings, yours are but stammer'd songs
To that enchantment fashion'd for him,
That ceremony of life's powers,
The loveliness of Vashti;
That unbelievable worship made
For King Ahasuerus.
He to whom the loveliest she is given,
Least is bound to ended things,
Belongeth most on earth to Heaven;
Hath the whitest wind of flame
To burn his soul clean of the world,

Clean of mortal imaginings,
And back to the Beauty whence he came.
Now you hear the glory of the king of kings,
That he knows Vashti, that he lives
In this pleasure always.
Ah, could you see her! But perhaps she is
Too fearful in her beauty for most men.
I think she would dismay you, and unhitch
The sinews from their purchase on your bones,
And have you spelled as a wizard spells his ghosts.
Yet 'twould be mercy so to harm your sense.
The truth does not more wonderfully walk,
Whose gestures are the stars, than in her ways
This queen's body sways.
And there is such language in her hair
As the sun's self doth talk.
King, let them see her! lest they return unwise
Of thy true kingship, and among themselves
Imagine that they are even as thou,
Save in the height of throne. Let them perceive
That, having Vashti, there is none like thee:
Others are men; but thou art he whose spirit
Is station'd in the beauty of the queen,
Whose flesh knows such amazement as before
Never beneath the lintels of man's sense
Came, an especial messenger from Heaven.

Ahasuerus.

Bring her! let the Queen come crowned before us!
Slaves, fetch here all your light to shine upon
My Vashti's beauty; let there be clear floor;
Make the air worthy her with camphire lit

And frankincense ; and fill the hall with flames.
Then gaze, kings, and stare, hunger with your eyes
Upon her face ; but within brakes of fear
Fasten your wills, and move not from your seats.
Exult, you thron'd nations, that to your sight
She shall be lent, the pleasure of the king,
She whom to visit so inflames my soul,
That I can judge how God burns to enjoy
The beauty of the Wisdom that he made
And separated from himself to be
Wife to the divine act, mother of heavens.—
Let Vashti come and stand before the kings !

III

VASHTI AND THE KING'S WOMEN AT THEIR FEAST

1st Woman.

Queen, is it well to be so sorrowful ?

2nd Woman.

And when the King our lord spendeth on us
This festival out of his rich heart, to shoot
Thy looks upon us as thou wouldst rebuke us ?

Vashti.

Your pardon : do I trouble your greed ?

1st Woman.

Our greed ?
Rather our gratitude——

2nd Woman.

That we have share
In these devices of the King's own cooks,
These costly breads,——

1st Woman.

And these delicious meats,
These sauces mixt of spicy treacle and balm.

3rd Woman.

And wines, purple and blue and like gold fire,
Made of the colours of the morning sea
And fragrance wild as woman's need of love.

Vashti.

Enjoy them then: who lets you?

3rd Woman.

Thou dost, Queen.
Thou sittest with hands folded in thy robe,
And in the midst of delicacies wilt fast.

1st Woman.

We see thine eyes upon them as they were
Wickedness.

2nd Woman.

'Tis rare bounty that we women
Halve with the King his festival.

3rd Woman.

And thou,
It seems, scarce findest it thankworthy.

Vashti.

Again,
Your pardon : but ye need not gaze on me.—
And yet, why am I sorrowful ? In truth,
Is it a sorrow that so leans upon me ?
I know not. But my soul knoweth right well
That I am watched.

3rd Woman.

Then in thy conscience, Queen,
Thou feelest the King requiring thanks of thee.

Vashti.

Be careful of thy tongue,—and of the wine.—
Who watches me ? Eyes are fixt on my soul,
Eyes of desire. I think some great event
Hath pusht its spirit forward of its time,
To stand here quietly waiting, into my mind
Inflicting its strange want of me, and ready
To fetch my heart, and ready to take my hand
And lead me away shrinking : is it Death ?
It is some marvellous thing : for I know surely
Behind it crowd out of their discipline
The coming hours to watch me seized, and stare
With questioning brows on me, and lift lean hands
From under gowns of shadow to point me out
One to another, saying : " This is she :
How will she bear it, think ye ? "—Is it not cold ?
Was there not wind just then ?—The flames are steady.

1st Woman.

No wind at all : the air's like one closed room.

2nd Woman.

There is no talk like this at the King's feast,
I warrant. Were we not best be merry,
And thank the King so for these wines and sweets?

Vashti.

Yes, let us not forget our thankfulness;
For is not, sisters, everything we have
Mere gift?

2nd Woman.

My beauty pays for what I get.

Vashti.

I would, 'twere not so.

2nd Woman.

Queen, I doubt thee not.

Vashti.

Pert little fool, where lies thy beauty, then?
Thou hast it not: its place is not thy flesh,
But the delighting loins of men, there only.
Thy beauty! And thou knowest not that man
Hath forged in his furnace of desire our beauty
Into that chain of law which binds our lives—
Man, please thyself, and woman, please thou man.
But thou wilt have thy beauty pence, thou sayest?
And what's thy purchase? Listen, I will tell thee:
Just that thou art not whipt and drudged: the rest,
All that thou hast beyond, is gift.

2nd Woman.

Why not ?

Vashti.

Truly, for thee, why not ?

2nd Woman.

Wouldst thou, 'twere yours ?

1st Woman.

Thou shudderest again ; what ails thee, Queen ?

Vashti.

I would have lived in beauty once.

2nd Woman.

In whose ?

Vashti.

I know the King finds relish in thy looks,
Wench, and I have no care to grudge thy pride ;
But when thy face is named throughout the world
For wonder, I will bear thy impudence.

1st Woman.

But tell us, Queen, thy thought ; for we have made
An end almost of eating ; and it seems
It will be somewhat strange, pleasing our mood.

Vashti.

Strange you will find it doubtless ; but scarce pleasing,
Unless 'tis pleasing to have news of danger.

Listen ! your lives are propt like a rotten house.
Your souls, that should have noble lodging here,
Have crept like peasants into huts that have
No force within their walls, but must be shored
With borrowed firmness. Yea, man's stubborn lust
To feed his heart upon your beauty, is all
The strength your lives have, all that holdeth you
Safe in the world,—propt like a rotten house.

1st Woman.

Shall woman then not love to have man's love ?

3rd Woman.

To feed his heart on us, thou sayest ? O yea !
And how can a woman know such might of living
As when upon her breast she feels the man,
The man of her desire, like sacrament
Feeding his heart, yea and his soul, on her ?

Vashti.

Are we for nought but so to nourish him ?

3rd Woman.

Thou art too proud, O Queen, too proud and lonely,
And goest apart to have thy thought too much.
'Tis known, too much thought dazes oft a mind,
Till it can learn nought of the signèd evil
God hath put in the faces of evil notions,
That spiritual sight may ken them coming
Sly and demure, and safely shut the brain
Ere they be in and swell themselves to lordship.

Hence is it that an evil thought in thee
Hath dared so far, and played its wickedness
Strangely within thee, braving even into speech.

1st Woman.

Strangely indeed thy brain's inhabited.
What, is there aught prosperity for woman
But to be shining in the thought of man ?

Vashti.

I wisht to prosper in the life I had,
That the Gods might approve the flourishing
Their heavenly graft of soul took from my flesh.
Therefore I wisht to love. And I did love.—
There came Ahasuerus conquering
Into my father's land. My fancying hate
Had made a man-beast of him, a thing, like man,
Tall in his walk, but in the mood of his eyes
A beast, and in the noise of his mouth a beast.
He came, and lookt at me ; and, in a while,
I saw that he was speaking to me there.
And all the maiden went in me before him,
Swifter than in a moon which looks against
The morning, all the silver courage fails.—
How cam'st thou to the King ?

1st Woman.

Sold to him, I.

2nd Woman.

Bought by him, I : for he had heard of me.

Vashti.

I also, sold or bought ; nay, rather paid :
Paid like cash to him, that as servant king
My father might have life, and a throne in life.
It mattered nothing then. [*The* QUEEN *pauses.*
Often in early summer, as I walkt
A girl singing her happiness, beside
The high green corn, holding all earth my own,
I saw, as my feet and my voice past by,
How in its hiding some croucht little beast
Startled, and filled a space of the gentle corn
With plunging quivering fear. And always then
My heart answer'd the fear that shook the corn,
With a sudden doubt in its beating ; for I knew
Within my life such rousing of dismay
I myself should watch, with seizing wonder.
It was so : in the midst of my new love,
That promist such a plenty in my soul,
At last some sleeping terror leapt awake,
And made the young growth shiver and wry about
Inwardly tormented. Yea, and my heart
It was, my heart in its hiding of green love,
That took so wildly the approaching sound
Of something strangely fearful walking near.

3rd Woman.

A queer tale, this.

1st Woman.

A spectre visited you ?

Vashti.

Indeed, a spectre.

1st Woman.

That have I never seen.
Was it the kind with nose and mouth grown sharp
To an eagle's bill, and claws upon its fingers,
The curve of them pasted with a bloody glue ?

Vashti.

The spectre was—my beauty.

3rd Woman.

It is as I said.
O Queen, send for a wise man in the morning ;
And let him leech thy spirit.

4th Woman.

I've heard, the best
Riddance for evil notions in the mind,
Is for a toad to sit upon the tongue ;
While, breathed against the scalp, some power of spells
Loosens the clasp the notion hath digg'd deep
Into the soul ; so that it passeth down,
Shaken and mastered, and creeps into the toad,——

3rd Woman.

Which gives a foolish kick or start to feel it,——

4th Woman.

Then the trapt notion may be easily burnt.

Vashti.

Yea ?—I think mine would not burn easily.
With fire, with such indignant fire as pride

Yields, when it must destroy itself to feel
The power of the world touch it with humbling flame,—
With such a fire, whose heat you know not of,
Have I assayed this—notion, didst thou say ?
And it stood upright, with its shape unquencht,
And lived within the fire.

3rd Woman.

Thou hast it wrong.

4th Woman.

Thou hast not understood the cure we meant.

2nd Woman.

Stop brabbling, fools ; I would hear the Queen's mind.

1st Woman.

I too ; I hate a thing I cannot skill ;
And thee and all that lives in thee, O Queen,
I would keep friendly to my spirit ; yet
I do suspect something amazing in thee.

Vashti.

And if thou seest not how slippery
Is women's place in the world of men, 'tis like
Thou wilt amazedly the vision take,
When I have led thee up my tower of thought.

2nd Woman.

How are we dangerous ? Are we not women,
Man's endless need ?

Vashti.

Ay, and therein the danger!
Is it not possible he hate the need?
For not as he were a beast it urges him:
He is aware of it, he knows its force.—
The kind of beasts is in their blood alone,
But man is blood and spirit. And in him,
As in all creature, is the word from God,
"Utter thyself in joy."

2nd Woman.

And we his joy.

Vashti.

But such an one that may become, perhaps,
Something not utterance, but strict commanding,
Yea, mastery, like the dancing in the blood
Of one bitten by spiders. And it is Spirit,
Spirit enjoying woman, that hath sent
A beating poison in the blood of man,
The poison which is lust. Spirit was given
To use life as a sense for ecstasy;
Life mixt with Spirit must exult beyond
Sex-madden'd men and sex-serving women,
Into some rapture where sweet fleshly love
Is as the air wherein a music rings.
But blood hath captured Spirit; Spirit hath given
The strength of its desire of joy to make
What ecstasy it may of woman's beauty,
And of this only, doing no more than train
The joys of blood to be more keen and cunning;

As men have trained and tamed wild lives of the forests,
Breeding them to more excellent shape and size
And tireless speed, and to know the words of men.
So the wise masterful Spirit rules the joys
That come all fierce from roaming the dark blood;
They are broken to his desire, they are wily for him,
A pack of lusts wherewith the Spirit hunts
Pleasure; and the chief prey the pleasure hid
In woman.

1st Woman.

What joys are these?

Vashti.

What joys?
The joys of rutting beasts, tamed to endure,
Tamed to be always swift to answer Spirit,
Yet fiercer for their taming, wilder hungers;
So that the Spirit, if he hunt them not,
Fears to be torn by them in mutiny.
Now know you woman's beauty! 'Tis these joys,
The heat of the blood's desires, changed and mastered
By the desire of spirit, trained to serve
Spirit with lust, spirit with woman enjoy'd.

2nd Woman.

Queen, I am beautiful, and cannot boast
Thy subtle thinking; and to one like me,
What matters whence come beauty, so I have it?
Let it be but the witless mating of beasts,
Tamed and curiously knowing itself
And cunning in its own delight: What then?
The nightingale desires his little lass,

And that brings out of his heart a radiant song ;
A man desires a woman, and for song
Out of his heart comes beauty, that like flame
Reaches towards her, and covers her limbs with light.
If it so please thee, say that neither loves
Aught but his life's desire, fashioning it
Adorably to marvellous song and beauty.
What then ? Enough that the wonder lights on me,
To me is paid the worship of the wonder.

Vashti.

O well I know how strong we are in man ;
His senses have our beauty for their god,
And his delight is built about us like
Towering adoration, housing worship.—
The spirit of man may dwell in God : the world,
From the soft delicate floor of grass to those
Rafters of light and hanging cloths of stars,
Is but the honour in God's mind for man,
Wrought into glorious imagination.
But women dwell in man ; our temple is
The honour of man's sensual ecstasy,
Our safety the imagined sacredness
Fashion'd about us, fashion'd of his pleasure.
Beauty hath done this for us, and so made
Woman a kind within the kind of man.
Yea, there is more than this : a mighty need
Hath man made of his woman in the world.
Now man walks through his fate in fellowship
Of two companion spirits ; ay, and these
With double mastery go on with him.
The one in black disgraceful weeds is Toil ;

She sows with never-ending gesture all
The path before his feet, cursing the way
She drags him on with growth of flouting crops,
Urchin thistles, and rank flourishing nettles.
But the other has a wear of woven gleam,
And with soft hand beseeches him his face
Away from the hardships of his hurt stung feet,
That with his eyes he may desire her looks:
And she is Beauty of Woman, man's dear blessing.
And if you would be wise, be well afraid
To think you have more office than to be
A sweet delicious while amid man's hours
Of worldly labour: we are too precious, so.
Yet see you not how this that Spirit hath done
Is also dangerous?—For there are mightier needs!
There's no content for Spirit in the world
Till he has striven out of bounded fate,
And sent an infinite desire forth
Into the whole eternity of things.
Yea, spirit ails with loathing secretly
The irremediable force of being;
Unless, with free expatiate desire,
He shape into the endless burning flux
Of starry world blindly adventuring
Some steady righteous destiny for Spirit:
Even as dreaming brain fashions the fume
Of life asleep to marshall'd imagery.
But we are in the way of this: and man,
The more he needs to announce upon the world,
Over him going like a storming air,
That fashioning word which utters the divine
Imagination working in him like anger;

The more he finds his virtue caught and clogged
In the fierce luxury he hath made of woman.
Thence are we sin, thence deliciously
Persuading man refuse his highest ardour.
Too easily kindled was the ecstasy
Of fleshly passion, with a joyous flame
Too readily answering the Spirit's fire!
He burns with us alone, so fragrantly
His noblest vigour swoons delighted. Yea,
Women, I tell you, not far now is man
From hating us, so passionate the joy
Of loving us, so mightily drawing down
Into the service of his pleasure here
All forces of his being. The pleasure soon
Becomes a shame, scarce to be spoken aloud;
And in best minds, either detested doting
Man's joy in woman's beauty will become;
Or a strict binding fire, holding him down
In lust of beauty where no beauty is.

[*The* KING'S MESSENGER *comes in.*

Messenger.

To Vashti, to the Queen of the world, to her
In whom the striving beauty of the world
Hath made perfection, from the King I come.
And the King bids me say, Rise from thy feast;
For thou must be to-night thyself a feast:
The vision of thy loveliness must now
Feed with astonishment my vassals' hearts.
Therefore thou art to come.

Vashti.

And tell the King
I will not come.

Messenger.

What was there in my words
Thou dost not understand?—I say, the King
Would show thy beauty to his under-kings,
That with this also they may be amazed
And utterly fear his fortune.

Vashti.

So. Go back,
Tell the King I have hearkened to his message,
And tell him I will not come.

Messenger.

What sickness shall I say has lighted on thee,
So that thou canst not come?

Vashti.

Thou weariest me.
Say this to the King, Vashti will not come.
Are they not plain, my words? Canst thou not learn them?

Messenger.

Give me some softer speech. Must I not fear
I shall earn whipping if I take these words?

Vashti.

I pray thee, go. Thou art a trouble here;
Seest thou not how all these feasting women

Pause, and the pleasure is distrest in them ?
Thou hast thy message : say, She will not come.—
Back to the King, now !

Messenger.

I am whipt for this.

[*He goes.*

Vashti.

It seems, my sisters, we have changed our moods.
But now, my mind was heavy, you were blithe ;
And in a moment, you, behold, are fixt
Gazing like desperate things, while I rejoice.

1*st Woman.*

Rejoice ! thou dost rejoice ? then madness does.

Vashti.

I know not that : but certainly I know
A mind, that has been feeling for long time
The greatness of some hovering event
Poised over life, will rejoice marvellously
When the event falls, suddenly seizing life :
Like faintness when a thunderstorm comes down,
That turns to exulting when the lightning flares,
Shattering houses, making men afraid.
And this is my event : I am its choice.
Yea, not as a storm, but as an eagle now
It stoops on me ; and, though I am its prey,
I am lifted by majestic wings, my soul
Is clothed in swiftness of a mighty soaring.

3rd Woman.

What glory can her wondrous eyes behold ?

4th Woman.

Seemeth her flesh to glow ! and her throat pants
As one who feels a god within her, come
Out of his heaven to enjoy her.

2nd Woman.

Ay,
Now it is true, the Queen is beautiful ;
She could, so looking, enrage love in one
Whose blood a hundred years had frozen dry.

1st Woman.

Ah, but I fear thee, Queen : this dreadful mood
Will break the pleasantness of friendship thou
Hast kept for me, as a ship in a gale is broken.

Vashti.

Ay, very like : and the event will rouse
Such work in the water where your comfort sails,
More than my fortune will to pieces blow ;
You too I think will get some perilous tossing
From what proves my destruction.

2nd Woman.

And, so knowing,
For mere insane delight in violent things,
Wilt thou awake in the fickle mood of men

Again that ancient ignominy which once,
Till beauty freed them, loaded the souls of women?

3rd Woman.

Truly, long time will work what now thou doest.

Vashti.

I know not rightly what I here begin;
No more than one, who stands in midst of wind
On a tall mountain, knows what breaking down
The earth must have ere the wind's speed is done,
And it hath drawn out of the drenched soil
The clinging vapours, and made bright the air.

2nd Woman.

But we'll not have thee disobedient.
The King's mind is a summer over us;
Thou with a storm wilt fill him, and the hail
That shatters thee will leave us bruised and weeping.

Vashti.

Be sulky in his arms: the weather soon
Will pleasantly favour thee again.

4th Woman.

No, no;
Not because from our heaven of man's mind
Thou wilt bring down on us a rain of scorn,
But because thou art wicked, thou must go
And tell the King the wine was rash in thee.

Vashti.

I must!

3rd Woman.

Thou must indeed: words such as thine
Never were impudent in men's ears before.

2nd Woman.

We will not have thee disobedient.

1st Woman.

Here comes another: gentle words, my Queen,
Let him take from thee now, and swiftly follow
Contrite, and let the beauty of thy grief
Bend pleading against the King's furious eyes.

[*The* POET *comes in, and kneels.*

Poet.

I will not ask thee what strange anger sent
That blaze of proud contempt in the King's face:
But ere the voice of the King seals up thy life
In an unalterable judgment, I
Am granted now to come as his last message:
And, as I will, to speak. Here then I am
Not as commanding, but on my knees beseeching,
And for myself beseeching.

Vashti.

What hast thou
To do with this? and wherefore wert thou chosen?

Poet.

I was to praise the splendour of the King;
And I made thee his splendour; and the King,
Knowing my truth, would have thee brought, to break
All the pride of his under-kings, already
Desperate with his riches, and now seeing
What marvellous fortune also hath his love,
How marvellously delighted.

Vashti.

Get thee back:
And tell the King 'tis time his judgment fell.

Poet.

Not till thou hearest me.

Vashti.

I will not hear thee.
Wouldst thou go on before me, and say, Look,
This is the woman which I told you of,
You kings; does she not, as I said, stir up
Quaking desire through all your muscles? Look,
And thank the King for showing you his lust!—
I will not hear thee.

Poet.

Dost thou not know, my Queen,
That, when I taught thee songs, thou taughtest me
The divine secret, Beauty? My small tunes
Were games to thee; but now I am he who knows
How man may walk upon Eternity

Wearing the world as a god wears his power,
The world upon him as a burning garment;
For I am he whose spirit knoweth beauty,—
And thou art the knowledge, Queen! Therefore thou must
Come with me to the kings of all the nations;
For the whole earth must know of thee. These kings,
Though it be but a lightning-moment struck
Upon the darkness of their ignorant hearts,
Must know what I know; that there is a beauty,
Only in thee shown forth in bodily sign,
Which can of life make such triumphant glee,
The force of the world seems but man's spirit utter'd.

Vashti.

And what am I to know?—This must, no doubt,
Content me, that we are as wine, and men
By us have senses drunk against his toil
Of knowing himself, for all his boasting mind,
Caught by the quiet purpose of the world,
Burnt up by it at last, like something fallen
In molten iron streaming. But I know
Not drunken may man's soul master his world;
And I now make for woman a new mood,
Wherein she will not bear to know herself
A heady drug for man.—I will not come.

Poet.

I, who have brought thy insult on the King,
Will scarce escape his judgment. But not this
My pleading. Seest thou not how wonderfully
The mean affairs of living fill with gleam,

Like pools of water lying in the sun,
Because above men's minds renown of thee,
The certain knowledge of beauty, now presides ?
It must not be that thou, for a whim of scorn,
Wilt let thyself be made unseen, unheard of.
Beauty is known in thee ; but, without thee,
It is a rumour buzzing hardly heard.
And without beauty men are scurrying ants,
Rapid in endless purpose unenjoyed ;
Or newts in holes under the banks of ponds,
Feeding and breeding without sound or light.
For the one thing that is the god in man
Is a delight that admirably knows
Itself delighted ; and it is but beauty.
And thou art beauty known.

Vashti.

Truly, I say,
I know not how to bear it ; that for you
To feel yourselves, though in the depth of the world,
Dizzy, and thence as if elate on high,
We women are devised like drunkenness.
And what are we to make of ourselves here,
When in the joy of us you think the world
No more than your spirits crying out for joy ?
Is this your love, to dream a god of man,
And women to keep as wine to make you dream ?—
Now, back ! or the eunuchs handle thee.

[*He goes.*

Vashti.

You will not hear of me after this night,
And thus I say farewell. It may be, far

In time not yet appointed, our life's spirit
Will know its fate, through all the thickets of grief,
As simply and as gladly as one's eyes
Greet the blue weather shining behind trees.
Yea, and I think there will be more than this:
Is not the world a terrible thing, a vision
Of fierce divinity that cares not for us?
Do we not seem immortal good desire,
Mortally wronged by capture in swift being
Made of a world that holds us firm for ever?
And yet is it not beautiful, the world?
How read you that? How is our wrong delightful?
Thus it is: Spirit finding the world fair,
Is spirit in dim perception of its own
Radiant desire piercing the worldly shadow.
But what is dim will become glorious clear:
All in a splendour will the Spirit at last
Stand in the world, for all will be naught else
But Spirit's own perfect knowledge of itself;
Yea, this dark mighty seeming of the world
Is but the Spirit's own power unsubdued;
And as the unruled vigours of thought in sleep
Crowd on the brain, and become dream therein;
So the strange outer forces of man's spirit
Are the appearing world. But all at last,
Subdued, becomes self-knowing ecstasy,
The whole world brightens into Spirit's desire.
This is for Spirit to be lord of life;
And man, with foolish hope looking for this,
Takes the ravishing drunkenness he hath
From us, for knowledge of the Spirit's power.
But it will come by love. It will be twain

Who go together to this height of mastery
Over the world, governing it as song
Is govern'd by the heart of him who sings ;
But never one by means of one shall reach it :
Not man alone, nor woman alone, but each
Enabling each, together, twain in one.

[*The* KING'S MESSENGER *comes in.*

Messenger.

I speak to the rebellious woman Vashti.
Thou art no more a Queen ; thou hast no place
In the King's house, nor in the life of men :
Thus art thou judged. Go forth now ; let the night
Befriend thee, for no other friend thou hast,
For the day shall reveal thee to men's eyes,
And they, obedient to the King, will hate thee.
Therefore be gone : and as the beasts have homes
In the wild ground, have thy home from henceforth.

Vashti.

Gives the King reason for this judgment ?

Messenger.

Yea ;
Because thou art a danger to all marriage,
Because men are dishonoured in their rule
Of women by thy insult, thou art judged.

2nd Woman.

But if the King had heard her crazy words
He would have put her where they tame with thongs
Maniacs.

4th Woman.

When the King hath slept, we will
To-morrow crave his presence, and will stand
In humble troop before him, thanking him
For that his virtue hath this wicked woman
Purged from among us, saved us from infection.

1st Woman.

Alas, my Queen! where lies thy journey now?

Vashti.

Ay, where to go? What shelter for me now
Will any of the dwelt earth dare to give?
My beauty as a branding now will mark me;
And shame will run before me, and await
My coming, wheresoever I would lodge.
For out of Shushan to the ends of the earth
Great news runs, with a hidden soundless speed
Through secret channels in the folks' dim mind,
As water races through smooth sloping gutters.
Swifter than any feet could bear the tale,
Going unheard, already posts abroad
A buried river, and will soon burst up
In towns and markets, far as the width of day,
A bubbling clamour, wonderful wild news:
"Vashti the Queen is judged and forced to go
Roaming the earth, outcast and infamous;
Look out for her! Be ready, if she comes,
With stones and hooting voices!"—Fare you well,
Women whom once I knew. You are quit of me:
Pardon me if I add, And I of you.

IV

Into the darkness fared the outcast Queen;
Fearless her face, and searching with proud gaze
The impenetrable hour. Behind her burned
The sky, held by the open kiln of the town
In a great breath of fire, yellow and red,
From out the festival streets, and myriad links.
Still might she taste, and still must choke to taste,
The fragrance of sweet oils and gums aflame
Capturing the cool night with spicy riches;
Still after her through the hollow moveless air
The sounded ceremonies came, the cry
Of dainty lust in winding tune of fifes,
The silver fury of cymbals clamouring
Like frenzy in a woman-madden'd brain;
And drumming underneath the whole wild noise,
Like monstrous hatred underneath desire,
The thunder of the beaten serpent-skins.
Yea, in the town behind her, flaring Shushan,
She heard Man, meaning to adore himself,
Throned on the wealth of earth as God in heaven,
And making music of his glorying thought,
Merely betray the mastery of his blood,
His sexual heart, his main idolatry,—
Woman, and his lust to devour her beauty,
Himself devoured ceaselessly by her beauty.
And well she knew, to herself bitterly smiling,
How the King seated amid his fellow-kings
Devised his grievous rage, feeling himself
Insulted in his dearest mind, his rule

Over the precious pleasure of his women
Wounded : how the man's wrath would hiss and swell
Like gross spittle spat into red-hot coals.
But as the Queen fared through the blinded hour,
Sudden against the darkness of her eyes
There came a wind of light. Crimson it was,
With smoky lightnings braided, in its first
Swift surge into the gloom before her face ;
But it began to golden, and became
Astonishingly white. And as she stood
With rigour in her nerves, a mighty shudder
Ravisht the light, and in the midst appeared
Vision, a goddess, terrible and kind ;
And to the Queen the goddess spoke, in voice
That healed her anger with its quietness.

Ishtar.

I am the goddess Ishtar, and thou art
My servant. Wilt thou any help of me ?

Vashti.

Am I then one whom gods may help ? I am
By men judged hateful : surely I am thereby
Made over to the demons, and not thine.

Ishtar.

Yet art thou mine, because thou knowest well
Thou disobeyest me.

Vashti.

How do I so ?

Ishtar.

I am the goddess of the power of women,
And passion in the hearts of men is my
Divinity.

Vashti.

Yea, then I disobey thee.

Ishtar.

And yet thou shalt not fear me wronging thee:
Tell me, O thou Despair, whither thou goest?

Vashti.

Thy taunt goes past me; I am not despair.

Ishtar.

Verily, but thou art. Is not thy mind
A hot revolter from the service due
To my divinity, passion in men's hearts?
Is there aught else that thou mayst serve? Thou knowest
There is naught else: therefore thou art Despair.

Vashti.

That I am infamous, I know. But even now,
Now when I learn I am to gods no more
Than to the lust of men, I will not be
Despair.

Ishtar.

Who means so greatly to serve pride,
That the service of the world is a thing loath'd,

Is desperate, avoided by mankind,
Unpleasing to the gods. We, who look down,
Know that the world and pride may both be served.
Yet also that it was too hard for thee
We know, and pardon. Thou shalt tell me now
Why thou refusest the life given thee.

Vashti.

Because I will not woman should be sin
Amid man's life. You gods have given man
Desire that too much knows itself; and thence
He is all confounded by the pleasure of us.
How sweetly doth the heart of man begin
Desiring us, how like music and the green
First happiness of the year! But this can grow
To uncontrollably crowding lust, beyond
All power of delight to utter, thence
Inwardly turned to anger and detesting!
Till, looking on us with strange eyes, man finds
We are not his desire: it was but sex
Inflamed, so that it roused the breaking forth
Of secret fury in him, consuming life,
Yea, even the life that would reach up to know
The heaven of gods above it.

Ishtar.

And what, for this,
Dost thou refuse?

Vashti.

I refuse woman's beauty!
Not merely to be feasting with delight
Man's senses, I refuse; but even his heart

I will not serve. Are we to be for ever
Love's passion in man, and never love itself?
Always the instrument, never the music?

Ishtar.

I have not done with man.—Thou sayest true,
Women are as a sin in life: for that
The gods have made mankind in double sex.
Sin of desiring woman is to be
The knowledgeable light within man's soul,
Whereby he kills the darken'd ache of being.
But shall I leave him there? or shall I leave
Woman amid these hungers? Nay: I hold
The rages of these fires as a soft clay
Obedient to my handling; there shall be
Of man desiring, and of woman desired,
A single ecstasy divinely formed,
Two souls knowing themselves as one amazement.
All that thou hatest to arouse in man
Prepareth him for this; and thou thyself
Art by thy very hate prepared: wherefore
The gods forgive thee, seeing what comes of thee.
Behold now! of my godhead I will make
Thy senses burn with vision, storying
The spirit of woman growing from loved to love.

The First Vision: Helen.

Helen am I, a name astonishing
The world, a fame that rings against the sky,
Like an alarm of brass smitten to sound
The news of war against the stone of mountains.

I move in power through the minds of men,
And have no power to hold my power back.
Men's passions fawn upon my feet, as waves
That fiercely fawn after the going wind;
But not as the wind, shaking off the foam
Of the pursuing lust of the moaning waves,
And over the clamour of the evil seas'
Monstrous word running lightly, unhurt.
They fawn upon me, all the lusts of the world,
Bewildering my steps with straining close,
And breathe their horrible spittle against me.
Passions cry round me with the yelling cry
Of dogs chained and starving and smelling blood.
Yea, for through me the world becomes a den
Of insane greed. In helpless beauty I stand
Alone in the midst of dreadful adoration;
And, round me thronged, the fawning, fawning lusts
Open their throats upon me and whine and lick
My feet with dripping tongues, or gaze to pant
Hot hunger in my face. For I am made
To set their hearts grim to possess my life,
And with an anger of love devour my beauty;
And yet to seal up in their mastered hearts
The rage, and bring them in croucht worship down
Before me, bent with impotent desire.
A quiet place the world was ere I came
A strife, a dream of fire, into its sleep;
And with their senses ended men's delights.
But I struck through their senses burning news
Of impossible endless things, and mixt
Wild lightning into their room of darkness.—Then
Agony, and a craving for delight

Escaping sensual grasp, began in men ;
And the agony was poison in the health
Of sweet desire.—The joy of me men tried
To compass with strange frenzy and desire
Made new with cunning. But still at my feet
The lusts they tarr on me crouch down and fawn
And snarl to be so fearful of their prey.
I see men's faces grin with helpless lust
About me ; crooked hands reach out to please
Their hot nerves with the flower of my skin ;
I see the eyes imagining enjoyment,
The arms twitching to seize me, and the minds
Inflamed like the glee-kindled hearts of fiends.
And through the world the fawning, fawning lusts
Hound me with worship of a ravenous yearning :
And I am weary of maddening men with beauty.

The Second Vision : Sappho.

Into how fair a fortune hath man's life
Fallen out of the darkness !—This bright earth
Maketh my heart to falter ; yea, my spirit
Bends and bows down in the delight of vision,
Caught by the force of beauty, swayed about
Like seaweed moved by the deep winds of water :
For it is all the news of love to me.
Through paths pine-fragrant, where the shaded ground
Is strewn with fruits of scarlet husk, I come,
As if through maidenhood's uncertainty,
Its darkness coloured with strange untried thoughts ;
Hither I come, here to the flowery peak
Of this white cliff, high up in golden air,
Where glowing earth and sea and divine light

Are in mine eyes like ardour, and like love
Are in my soul: love's glowing gentleness,
The sunny grass of meadows and the trees,
Towers of dark green flame, and that white town
Where from the hearths, a fragrance of burnt wood,
Blue-purple smoke creeps like a stain of wine
Along the paved blue sea: yea, all this kindness
Lies amid salt immeasurable flowing,
The power of the sea, passion of love.
I, Sappho, have made love the mastery
Most sacred over man; but I have made it
A safety of things gloriously known,
To house his spirit from the darkness blowing
Out of the vast unknown: from me he hath
The wilful mind to make his fortune fair.
Yea, here I stand for the whole earth to see
How life, breathing its fortune like sweet air,
Mixing it with the kindled heart of man,
May utter it proud against the double truth
Of darkness fronting him and following him,
In a prevailing, burning, marvellous lie!
And it is love kindles the burning of it,
The quivering flame of spoken-forth desire,
Which man hath made his place within the world,—
Love, learnt of Sappho! and not only bright
With gladness: I have devised an endless pain,
The fearful spiritual pain of love, to hold
In a firm fire, unalterably bright,
The shining forth of Spirit's imagination
Declared against the investing dark, a light
Of pain and joy, equal for man and woman.

The Third Vision: Theresa.

Come, golden bridegroom, break this mortal night,
Five times chained with darkness of my senses.
At last now visit my desire, and turn
Thy feet, and the flaming path of thy feet,
Unto these walls lockt round me like a death.
Death I would have them till thou comest; yea,
The earthly stone whereof man's fortune here
Is made, strongly into deliberate death
I have built about my soul, to fend its life
From gazes of the world. I am too proud
To endure the world's desire of my beauty;
I know myself too marvellous in love
To be the joy of aught that thou hast made:
I am to be bride of thee, of the world's maker.
O God, the heart I have from thee, the heart
Uttering itself in an endless word of love,
Is sealed up in the stone of worldly night:
Set hitherward the flaming way of thy feet,
Break my night, and enter in unto me.
Come, wed my spirit; and like as the sea,
Into the shining spousal ecstasy
Of sun and wind, riseth in cloudy gleam,
So let the knowing of my flesh be clouds
Of fire, mounting up the height of my spirit,
Fire clouding with flame the marriage hour
Wherein my spirit keeps thy dreadful light
Away from Heaven in a bridal kiss,—
Fire of bodily sense in spiritual glee
Held, as fire of water in sunlit air.
Ah God, beautiful God, my soul is wild

With love of thee. Hitherward turn thy feet,
Turn their golden journeying towards this night,—
This night of cavernous earth ; and now let shine
These walls of stone, against thy nearing love,
Like pure glass smitten by the power of the sun ;
And let them be, in thy descending love,
Like glass in a furnace, falling molten down,
Back from thy burning feet streaming and flowing,
Leaving me naked to thy bright desire.—
Enjoy me, God, enjoy thy bride to-night.

Vashti.

Too well I know the first, the scarlet clad ;
And she, that was in shining white and gold,
Was as the sound of bees and waters, at last
Heard by one long closed in the dins of madness.
But what was she, the black-robed, with the eyes
So fearfully alight, the last who spoke ?

Ishtar.

Take none of these for perfect : they are moods
Purifying my women to become
My unexpressive, uttermost intent.—
As music binds into a strict delight
The manifold random sounds that shake the air,
Even so fashioned must I have the being
That fills with rushing power the boundless spirit :
Amidst it, musically firm, a joy
That is a fiery knowledge of itself,
Thereby self-continent, a globèd fire.
And she who gave thee wonder, is the sign
Of those who firmest, brightest hold their being

Fastened and seized in one enjoyed desire.
Yet even they are but a making ready
For what I perfectly intend : in them
Joy of self-bound desire hath burnt itself
To extreme purity ; I am free thereby
To work my meaning through them, my divinity.
Yea, such clean fire in man and such in woman
To mingle wonderfully, that the twain
Become a moment of one blazing flame
Infinitely upward towering, far beyond
The boundless fate of spirit in the world.
But in the way to this are maladies
And anguish ; and as a perilous bridge
Over the uncontrolled demanding world,
Virginity, passionate self-possessing,
Must build itself supreme, unbreakable.
——I leave thee : as thou mayst, be comforted
By prophecy of what I mean in life.
Against thee is not Heaven ; and thou must
Endure the hatred men will throw upon thee.

. . . . . .

The shining place where Ishtar looked at her
Empty the Queen beheld ; and into mist
The glory fainted, and the stars came through
Untroubled. Into the night the Queen went on.

PART II

IMPERFECTION

MARY

[A LEGEND OF THE FORTY-FIVE]

I

A street in Carlisle leading to the Scottish Gate. Three girls, MARY, KATRINA, *and* JEAN.

Katrina.

What a year this has been!

Mary.

There's many a lass
Will blench to hear the date of it—Forty-five,—
Poor souls! Why will the men be fighting so,
Running away to find out death, as if
It were some tavern full of light and fiddling?
And when the doors are shut, what of the girls
Who gave themselves away, and still must live?
Are not men thoughtless?

Katrina.

Leaving only kisses
To be remembered by.

Jean.

That's not so bad
As when the dead lads went beyond kissing.

Mary.

Poor souls! Well, Carlisle has at least three hearts
That are not crying for a lad who's gone
Listening to the lean old Crowder, Death.
We needn't mope: and yet it's sad.

Jean.

Come on,
Why are we dawdling? All the heads are up,
Steepled on spikes above the Scottish Gate,—
Some of the rebels rarely handsome too.

Mary.

Won't it be rather horrible?

Katrina.

A row
Of chopt-off heads sitting on spikes—ugh!

Jean.

Yes,
And I daresay blood dribbling here and there.

Mary.

Don't, Jean! I am going back. I was
Forbid the gate.

Katrina.

And so was I.

Jean.

And I.

Katrina.

But a mere peep at them ?

Jean.

Yes, come on, Mary.

Mary.

We might just see how horrible they are.

Jean.

Sure, they will make us shudder ;

Katrina.

Or else cry.

[*A* MAN *meets them.*

Man.

Are you for the show, my girls ?

Jean.

We aren't your girls.

Katrina.

Do you mean the heads upon the Scottish Gate ?

Man.

Ay, that's the show, a pretty one.

Jean.

Are all
The rebels' heads set up ?

Man.

All, all ; their cause
Is fallen flat ; but go you on and see
How wonderly their proud heads are elate.

Katrina.

Do any look as if they died afeared ?

Man.

Go and learn that yourselves. And when you mark
How grimly addled all the daring is
Now in those brains, do as your hearts shall bid you,
And that is weep, I hope.

Mary.

O let's go back.

Jean.

We have no friends spiked on the Scottish Gate.

Man.

No ? Well, there's quite a quire of voices there,
Blessing the King's just wisdom for his stern
Strong policy with the rebels.

Mary.

Who are those ?—
I think it's fiendish to have killed so many.

Man.

The chattering birds, my lass, and droning flies :
They're proper Whigs, are birds and flies,—or else
The Whigs are proper crows and carrion-bugs.
[*He goes on past them.*

Katrina.

A Jacobite ?

Jean.

That's it, I warrant you.
One of the stay-at-homes.

Mary.

Now promise me,
We'll only take a glimpse, girls, a short glimpse.

Jean (*laughing*).

Yes, just to see how horrible they are.
[*They go on towards the gate.*

II

The Scottish Gate, Carlisle. Among the crowd.

Mary.

O why did we come here ?

Jean.

One, two, three, four—
A devil's dozen of them at the least.

Katrina.

Poor lads! They did not need to set them up
So high, surely. Which is the one you'ld call
Prettiest, Jean?

Jean.

That fellow with the sneer;
The axe's weight could not ruffle his brow,—
How signed it is with scorn!

Katrina.

Ah yes, he's dark
And you are red: Mary and I will choose
Some golden fellow. Which do you think, Mary?

Jean.

O, but mine is the one! Look—do you see?—
He must have put his curls away from the axe;
Or did they part themselves when he knelt down,
And let the stroke have his nape white and bare?
O could a girl not nestle snug and happy
Against a neck, with such hair covering her!

Katrina.

Now, Mary, we must make our yellow choice;
You've got good eyes; which do you fancy?—Jean!
What ails her?

Jean.

How she stares! which is the one
She singles out? That topmost boy it is,—
Pretty enough for a flaxen poll indeed.
Is that your lad, Mary?

Katrina.

She's ill or fey;
They are too much for her; and I truly
Am nearly weeping for them and their wives and lasses.
Her eyes don't budge! She's fastened on his face
With just the look that one would have to greet
The ghost of one's own self. See, all her blood
Is trapt in her heart,—pale she is as he.

A Man in the Crowd.

Can't you see she's fainting? 'Tis no sight
For halfling girls.

Jean.

Halfling yourself.

Katrina.

Mary!

Mary.

Let us go home now: help me there, Katrina.

Katrina.

Yes, dear, but are you ill?

Mary.

No: let us go home.

Katrina (to Jean).

Come, Jean. Did you not hear her gasp? We must
Be with her on her way home.

Jean.

You go then.
I've not lookt half enough at these. Besides——

[MARY *and* KATRINA *go.*

Well, sir, how dare you speak to girls like that,
When they're alone?

The Man.

You needn't be so short;
I guess you're one to take fine care of yourself.

Jean.

Yes, and I'ld choose a better-looking man
Than you, my chap, if I wanted company.

The Man.

Come this way, you'll see better.

Jean.

Impudence!
Who said your arm might be there?

The Man.

O, it's all right.

Jean.

And what do you think of the rebels now they're dead?

III

Mary lying awake in bed.

O let me reason it out calmly! Have I
No stars to take me through this terror, poured
Suddenly, dreadfully, on to my heart and spirit?
Why is it I, of all the world I only
Who must so love against nature? I knew
Always, that not like harbour for a boat,

Not a smooth safety, Love would take my soul ;
But like going naked and empty-handed
Into the glitter and hiss of a wild sword-play,
I should fall in love, and in fear and danger :
But a danger of white light, a fear of sharpness
Keen and close to my heart, not as it proves,—
My heart hit by a great dull mace of terror !

. . . . . .

So it has come to me, my hope, my wonder !
Now I perceive that I was one of those
Who, till love comes, have breath and beating blood
In one continual question. All the beauty
My happy senses took till now has been
Drugg'd with a fiery want and discontent,
That settled in my soul and lay there burning.
The hills, wearing their green ample dresses
Right in the sky's blue courts, with swerving folds
Along the rigour of their stony sinews—
(Often they garr'd my breath catch and stumble),—
The moon that through white ghost of water went,
Till she was ring'd about with an amber window,—
The summer stars seen winking through dusk leaves ;
All the earth's manners and most loveliness,
All made my asking spirit stir within me,
And throb with a question, whose answer is,
(As now I know, but then I did not know)
There is a Man somewhere meant for me.—
And I have seen the face of him for whom
My soul was made !
Ah, somewhere ? Where is that ?
Have I not dreamt that he is gone away,

Gone ere he loved me ? Now I lose myself.
I only have seen my boy's murder'd head.

. . . . . .

Yes, again light breaks through and quells my thought.
The whole earth seemed as it belonged to me,
A message spoken out in green and blue
Specially to my heart ; and it would say
That some time, out of the human multitude
A face would look into my soul, and sign
All my nature, easily as it were wax,
With its dear image ; but after that impress
I would all harden, so that nought could raze
The minting of that seal from off my being.
And yesterday it fell. An idle whim
To see the rebels on the Scottish Gate,—
And there was the face of him I was made to love,
There,—ah God,—on the gate, my murder'd lad !
Did any girl have first-sight love like this ?
Not to have ever seen him, only seen
Such piteous token that he has been born,
Lived and grown up to beauty, the man who was meant
To sleep upon my breast, and dead before
The sweet custom of love could be between us !
To have but seen his face ?—Is that enough
To make me clear he is my man indeed ?
Why, sure there are tales bordering on my lot
In misery ?—Of hearts who have been stabbed
By knowledge that their mates were in the earth,
Yet never could come near enough to be healed ;
Of those who have gone longing all a life,
Because a voice heard singing or a gesture

Seen from afar gospell'd them of love;
And no more than the mere announcement had.
Ah, but all these to mine were kindly dealing;
For not till they'd trepann'd him out of life
Did he, poor laggard, come to claim my soul.—
O my love, but your ears played you falsely
When they were taken by Death's wily tunes!

. . . . . .

Am I so hardly done to, who have seen
My lover's face, been near enough to worship
The very writing of his spirit in flesh?
For having that in my ken, I am not far
From loving with my eyes all his body.
What a set would his shoulders have, and neck,
To bear his goodly-purposed head; what gait
And usage of his limbs!—Ah, do you smile?
Why, even so I knew your smile would be,
Just such an over-brimming of your soul.
O love, love, love, then you have come to me!
How I have stayed aching for you! Come close,
Here's where you should have been long time, long time.
It is your rightful place. And I had left
Thinking you'ld come and kiss me over my heart!
Ah lad, my lad, they told me you were dead.

IV

At Dawn. The Scottish Gate.

Mary (*on her way to the gate, singing to herself*).

As a wind that has run all day
Among the fragrant clover,
At evening to a valley comes;
So comes to me my lover.

And as all night a honey'd warmth
Stays where the wind did lie,
So when my lover leaves my arms
My heart's all honey.

But what have I to do with this? And when
Was that song put in hiding 'mid my thought?
I might be on my way to meet and give
Good morrow to my——Ah! last night, last night!
O fie! I must not dream so.

[*At the Gate.*

It *was* I!
I am the girl whose lover they have killed,
Who never saw him until out of death
He lookt into my soul. I was to meet
Somewhere in life my lover, and behold,
He has turned into an inn I dare not enter,
And gazes through a window at my soul
Going on labour'd with this loving body.—
Did I not sleep last night with you in my arms?
I could have sworn it. Why should body have

So large a part in love ? For if 'twere only
Spirit knew how to love, an easy road
My feet had down to death. But I must want
Lips against mine, and arms marrying me,
And breast to kiss with its dear warmth my breast,—
Body must love ! O me, how it must ache
Before it is as numb as thine, dear boy !
Poor darling, didst thou forget that I was made
To wed thee, body and soul ? For surely else
Thou hadst not gone from life.—
Ah, folk already,
Coming to curse the light with all their stares.

V

KATRINA *and* JEAN.

Katrina.

Where are you off to, Jean, in such a tear ?

Jean.

I'm busy.

Katrina.

O you light-skirts ! who is it now ?
You think I can't guess what your business is ?
Is it aught fresh, or only old stuff warmed ?

Jean.

Does not the smartness in your wits, Katrina,
Make your food smack sourly ?—Well, this time,
It's serious with me. I believe I'm caught.

Katrina.

O but you've had such practice in being caught,
You'll break away quite easily when you want.
Tell me now who it is.

Jean.

The man who spoke
When we were at the Scottish Gate that day.
O, he's a dapper boy! Did you mark his eyes?

Katrina.

Nay, I saw nought but he was under-grown.

Jean.

Pooh! He can carry me.

Katrina.

Jean, have you heard
Of Mary lately?—I vow she's in love.

Jean.

Never! with whom?

Katrina.

The thing's a wonder, Jean.
She'll speak to no one now, and every day,
Morning and evening, she's at the gate
Gazing like a fey creature on that head
She was so stricken to behold—you mind it?—
I tell you she's in love with it.

Jean.

O don't be silly.
How can you fall in love with a dead man?
And what good could he do you, if you did?
One loves for kisses and for hugs and the rest;
A spunky fellow,—that's the thing to love.
But a dead man,—pah, what a foolery!

Katrina.

O yes, to you ; for Love's a game for you.
'Twill turn out dangerous maybe, but still,—a game.

Jean.

Yes, the best kind of game a girl can play,
And all the better for the risk, Katrina.
But where the fun would be in Love if he
You played with had not heart to jump, nor blood
To tingle, nothing in him to go wild
At seeing you betray your love for him,
Beats me to understand. You'ld be as wise
Blowing the bellows at a pile of stone
As loving one that never lived for you.
It isn't just to make a wind you blow,
But to turn red fire into white quivering heat.
Whatever she's after, 'tis not love, my girl :
I know what love is. But perhaps she saw
The poor lad living ? Even had speech with him ?

Katrina.

Not she ; Mary has never known a lad
I did not know as well. We've shared our lives
As if we had been sisters, and I'm sure
She's never been in love before.

Jean.

Before ?
Don't talk such sentimental nonsense—

Katrina.

Why,
If Love-at-first-sight can mean anything,
Surely 'tis this : there's some one in the world

Whom, if you come across him, you must love,
And you could no more pass his face unmoved
Than the year could go backwards. Well, suppose
He dies just ere you meet him ; and he dead,
Ay, or his head alone, is given your eyes,
It is enough : he is the man for you,
All as if he were quick and signalling
His heart to you in smiles.

Jean.

Believe me, dear,
You've no more notion of the thing called Love
Than a grig has of talking. But I have,
And I'm off now to practise with my notions.

Katrina.

Now which is the real love,—hers or Mary's ?

VI

Before Dawn. At the Scottish Gate.

Mary.

Beloved, beloved !—O forgive me
That all these days questioning I have been,
Struggled with doubts. Your power over me,
That here slipt through the nets death caught you in,
Lighted on me so greatly that my heart
Could scarcely carry the amazement. Now
I am awake and seeing ; and I come
To save you from this post of ignominy.

A ladder I have filched and thro' the streets
Borne it, on shoulders little used to weight.
You'll say that I should not have bruised myself ?—
But it is good, and an ease for me, to have
Some ache of body.—Now if there's any chink
In death, surely my love will reach to thee,
Surely thou wilt be ware of how I go
Henceforth through life utterly thine. And yet
Pardon what now I say, for I must say it.
I cannot thank thee, my dear murder'd lad,
For mastering me so. What other girls
Might say in blessing on their sweethearts' heads,
How can I say ? They are well done to, when
Love of a man their beings like a loom
Seizes, and the loose ends of purposes
Into one beautiful desire weaves.
But love has not so done to me : I was
A nature clean as water from the hills,
One that had pleased the lips of God ; and now
Brackish I am, as if some vagrom malice
Had trampled up the springs and made them run
Channelling ancient secrecies of salt.
O me, what, has my tongue these bitter words
In front of my love's death ? Look down, sweetheart,
From the height of thy sacred ignominy
And see my shame. Nay, I will come up to thee
And have my pardon from thy lips, and do
The only good I can to thee, sweetheart.

. . . . . .

I have done it : but how have I done it ?
And what's this horrible thing to do with me ?

How came it on the ground, here at my feet ?
O I had better have shirkt it altogether !
What do I love ? Not this ; this is only
A message that he left on earth for me,
Signed by his spirit, that he had to go
Upon affairs more worthy than my love.
We women must give place in our men's thoughts
To matters such as those.
God, God, why must I love him ? Why
Must life be all one scope for the hawking wings
Of Love, that none the mischief can escape ?—
Well, I am thine for always now, my love,
For this has been our wedding. No one else,
Since thee I have had clasped unto my breast,
May touch me lovingly.—
Light, it is light !
What shall I do with it, now I have got it ?
O merciful God, must I handle it
Again ? I dare not ; what is it to me ?
Let me off this ! Who is it clutches me
By the neck behind ? Who has hold of me
Forcing me stoop down ? Love, is it thou ?
Spare me this service, thou who hast all else
Of my maimed life : why wilt thou be cruel ?
O grip me not so fiercely, Love ! Ah no,
I will not : 'tis abominable——

JEAN

I

The Parlour of a Public House. Two young men, MORRIS *and* HAMISH.

Hamish.

Come, why so moody, Morris? Either talk,
Or drink, at least.

Morris.

I'm wondering about Love.

Hamish.

Ho, are you there, my boy? Who may it be?

Morris.

I'm not in love; but altogether posed
I am by lovers.

Hamish.

They're a simple folk:
I'm one.

Morris.

It's you I'm mainly thinking of.

Hamish.

Why, that's an honour, surely.

Morris.

Now if I loved
The girl you love, your Jean, (look where she goes
Waiting on drinkers, hearing their loose tongues ;
And yet her clean thought takes no more of soil
Than white-hot steel laid among dust can take !)—

Hamish.

You not in love, and talking this fine stuff ?

Morris.

I say, if I loved Jean, I'ld do without
All these vile pleasures of the flesh, your mind
Seems running on for ever : I would think
A thought that was always tasting them would make
The fire a foul thing in me, as the flame
Of burning wood, which has a rare sweet smell,
Is turned to bitter stink when it scorches flesh.

Hamish.

Why specially Jean ?

Morris.

Why Jean ? The girl's all spirit !

Hamish.

She's a lithe burd, it's true ; that, I suppose,
Is why you think her made of spirit,—unless
You've seen her angry : she has a blazing temper.—
But what's a girl's beauty meant for, but to rouse
Lust in a man ? And where's the harm in that,—
In loving her because she's beautiful,
And in the way that drives me ?—I dare say
My spirit loves her too. But if it does
I don't know what it loves.

Morris.

Why, man, her beauty
Is but the visible manners of her spirit;
And this you go to love by the filthy road
Which all the paws and hoofs in the world tread too!
God! And it's Jean whose lover runs with the herd
Of grunting, howling, barking lovers,—Jean!—

Hamish.

O spirit, spirit, spirit! What is spirit?
I know I've got a body, and it loves:
But who can tell me what my spirit's doing,
Or even if I have one?

Morris.

Well, it's strange,
My God, it's strange. A girl goes through the world
Like a white sail over the sea, a being
Woven so fine and lissom that her life
Is but the urging spirit on its journey,
And held by her in shape and attitude.
And all she's here for is that you may clutch
Her spirit in the love of a mating beast!

Hamish.

Why, she has fifty lovers if she has one,
And fifty's few for her.

Morris.

I'm going out.
If the night does me good, I'll come back here
Maybe, and walk home with you.

Hamish.

O don't bother.
If I want spirit, it will be for drinking.

[MORRIS *goes out.*

Spirit or no, drinking's better than talking.
Who was the sickly fellow to invent
That crazy notion spirit, now, I wonder ?
But who'd have thought a burly lout like Morris
Would join the brabble ? Sure he'll have in him
A pint more blood than I have ; and he's all
For loving girls with words, three yards away !

JEAN *comes in.*

Jean.

Alone, my boy ? Who was your handsome friend ?

Hamish.

Whoever he was he's gone. But I'm still here.

Jean.

O yes, you're here ; you're always here.

Hamish.

Of course,
And you know why.

Jean.

Do I ? I've forgotten.

Hamish.

Jean, how can you say that ? O how can you ?

Jean.

Now don't begin to pity yourself, please.

Hamish.

Ah, I am learning now ; it's truth they talk.
You would undo the skill of a spider's web
And take the inches of it in one line,
More easily than know a woman's thought.
I'm ugly on a sudden ?

Jean.

The queer thing
About you men is that you will have women
Love in the way you do. But now learn this ;
We don't love fellows for their skins ; we want
Something to wonder at in the way they love.
A chap may be as rough as brick, if you like,
Yes, or a mannikin and grow a tail,—
If he's the spunk in him to love a girl
Mainly and heartily, he's the man for her.—
My soul, I've done with all you pretty men ;
I want to stand in a thing as big as a wind ;
And I can only get your paper fans !

Hamish.

You've done with me ? You wicked Jean ! You'll dare
To throw me off like this ? After you've made,
O, made my whole heart love you ?

Jean.

You are no good.
Your friend, now, seems a likely man ; but you ?—
I thought you were a torch ; and you're a squib.

Hamish.

Not love you enough ? Death, I'll show you then.

Jean.

Hands off, Hamish. There's smoke in you, I know,
And splutter too. Hands off, I say.

Hamish.

By God
Tell me to-morrow there's no force in me !

Jean.

Leave go, you little beast, you're hurting me :
I never thought you'ld be so strong as this.
Let go, or I'll bite ; I mean it. You young fool,
I'm not for you. Take off your hands. O help !

[Morris *has come in unseen and rushes forward.*

Morris.

You beast ! You filthy villainous fellow !—Now,
I hope I've hurt the hellish brain in you.
Take yourself off. You'll need a nurse to-night.

[Hamish *slinks out.*

Poor girl ! And are you sprained at all ? That ruffian !

Jean.

O sir, how can I thank you ? You don't know
What we poor serving girls must put up with.
We don't hear many voices like yours, sir.
They think, because we serve, we've no more right
To feelings than their cattle. O forgive me
Talking to you. You don't come often here.

Morris.

No, but I will : after to-night I'll see
You take no harm. And as for him, I'll smash him.

Jean.

Yes, break the devil's ribs,—I mean,—O leave me ;
I'm all distraught.

Morris.

Good night, Jean. My name's Morris.

Jean.

Good night, Morris—dear. O I must thank you.
[*She suddenly kisses him.*
Perhaps,—perhaps, you'll think that wicked of me ?

Morris.

You wicked ? O how silly !—But—good night.
[*He goes.*

Jean.

The man, the man ! What luck ! My soul, what luck !

II

JEAN *by herself, undressing.*

Yes, he's the man. Jean, my girl, you're done for,
At last you're done for, the good God be thankt.—
That was a wonderful look he had in his eyes :
'Tis a heart, I believe, that will burn marvellously !
Now what a thing it is to be a girl !

Who'ld be a man ? Who'ld be fuel for fire
And not the quickening touch that sets it flaming ?—
'Tis true that when we've set him well alight
(As I, please God, have set this Morris burning)
We must be serving him like something worshipt ;
But is it to a man we kneel ? No, no ;
But to our own work, to the blaze we kindled !
O, he caught bravely. Now there's nothing at all
So rare, such a wild adventure of glee,
As watching love for you in a man beginning ;—
To see the sight of you pour into his senses
Like brandy gulpt down by a frozen man,
A thing that runs scalding about his blood ;
To see him holding himself firm against
The sudden strength of wildness beating in him !
O what my life is waiting for, at last
Is started, I believe : I've turned a man
To a power not to be reckoned ; I shall be
Held by his love like a light thing in a river !

III

MORRIS *by himself.*

It is a wonder ! Here's this poor thing, Life,
Troubled with labours of the endless war
The lusty flesh keeps up against the spirit ;
And down amid the anger—who knows whence ?—
Comes Love, and at once the struggling mutiny
Falls quiet, unendurably rebuked :
And the whole strength of life is free to serve

Spirit, under the regency of Love.
The quiet that is in me! The bright peace!
Instead of smoke and dust, the peace of Love!
Truly I knew not what a turmoil life
Has been, and how rebellious, till this peace
Came shining down! And yet I have seen things,
And heard things, that were strangely meaning this,—
Telling me strangely that life can be all
One power undisturbed, one perfect honour,—
Waters at noonday sounding among hills,
Or moonlight lost among vast curds of cloud;—
But never knew I it is only Love
Can rule the noise of life to heavenly quiet.
Ah, Jean, if thou wilt love me, thou shalt have
Never from me upon thy purity
The least touch of that eager baseness, known,
For shame's disguising, by the name of Love
Most wickedly; thou shalt not need to fear
Aught from my love, for surely thou shalt know
It is a love that almost fears to love thee.

IV

The Public House. MORRIS *and* JEAN.

Jean.

O, you are come again!

Morris.

Has he been here,
That blackguard, with some insolence to you?

Jean.

Who ?

Morris.

Why, that Hamish.

Jean.

Hamish ? No, not he.

Morris.

I thought—you seemed so breathless—

Jean.

But you've come
Again ! May I not be glad of your coming ?
Yes, and a little breathless ?—Did you come
Only because you thought I might be bullied ?

Morris.

O, no, no, no, Only for you I came.

Jean.

And that's what I was hoping.

Morris.

If you could know
How it has been with me, since I saw you !

Jean.

What can I know of your mind ?—For my own
Is hard enough to know,—save that I'm glad
You've come again,—and that I should have cried
If you'd not kept your word.

Morris.

My word ?—to see
Hamish does nothing to you ?

Jean.

The fiend take Hamish !
Do you think I'ld be afraid of him ?—It's you
I ought to be afraid of, were I wise.

Morris.

Good God, she's crying !

Jean.

Cannot you understand ?

Morris.

O darling, is it so ? I prayed for this
All night, and yet it's unbelievable.

Jean.

You too, Morris ?

Morris.

There's nothing living in me
But love for you, my sweetheart.

Jean.

And you are mine,
My sweetheart !—And now, Morris, now you know
Why you are the man that ought to frighten me !—
Morris, I love you so !

Morris.

O, but better than this,
Jean, you must love me. You must never think
I'm like the heartless men you wait on here,
Whose love is all a hunger that cares naught
How hatefully endured its feasting must be
By her who fills it, so it be well glutted!

Jean.

I did not say I was afraid of you;
But only that, perhaps, I ought to be.

Morris.

No, no, you never ought. My love is one
That will not have its passion venturous;
It knows itself too fine a ceremony
To risk its whole perfection even by one
Unruly thought of the luxury in love.
Nay, rather it is the quietness of power,
That knows there is no turbulence in life
Dare the least questioning hindrance set against
The onward of its going,—therefore quiet,
All gentle. But strong, Jean, wondrously strong!

Jean.

Yes, love is strong. I have well thought of that.
It drops as fiercely down on us as if
We were to be its prey. I've seen a gull
That hovered with beak pointing and eyes fixt
Where, underneath its swaying flight, some fish
Was trifling, fooling in the waves: then, souse!
And the gull has fed. And love on us has fed.

Morris.

Indeed 't is a sudden coming ; but I grieve
To hear you make of love a cruelty.
Sweetheart, it shall be nothing cruel to you !
You shall not fear, in doing what love bids,
Ever to know yourself unmaidenly.
For see ! here's my first kiss ; and all my love
Is signed in it ; and it is on your hand.—
Is that a thing to fear ?—But it were best
I go now. This should be a privacy,
Not even your lover near, this hour of first
Strange knowledge that you have accepted love.
I think you would feel me prying, if I stayed
While your heart falters into full perceiving
That you are plighted now forever mine.
God bless you, Jean, my sweetheart.—Not a word ?
But you will thank me soon for leaving you :
'Tis the best courtesy I can do.

[*He goes.*

Jean.

O, and I thought it was my love at last !
I thought, from the look he had last night, I'd found
That great, brave, irresistible love !—But this !
It's like a man deformed, with half his limbs.
Am I never to have the love I dream and need,
Pouring over me, into me, winds of fire ?

HAMISH *comes in.*

Hamish.

Well ? What's the mood to-night ?—The girl's been crying !
This should be something queer.

Jean.

It's you are to blame :
You brought him here !

Hamish.

It's Morris this time, is it ?
And what has he done ?

Jean.

He's insulted me.
And you must never let me see him again.

Hamish.

Sure I don't want him seeing you. But still,
If I'm to keep you safe from meeting him—

Jean.

To look in his eyes would mortify my heart !

Hamish.

Then you'ld do right to pay me.

Jean.

What you please.

Hamish.

A kiss ?

Jean.

Of course ; as many as you like—
And of any sort you like.

KATRINA

I

On the sea-coast. Three young men, SYLVAN, VALENTINE, *and* FRANCIS.

Valentine.

Well, I suppose you're out of your fear at last,
Sylvan. This land's empty enough ; naught here
Feminine but the hens, bitches, and cows.
Now we are safe !

Francis.

Horribly safe ; for here,
If there are wives at all, they are salted so
They have no meaning for the blood, bent things
Philosophy allows not to be women.

Valentine.

But think of the husbands that must spend their nights
Alongside skin like bark. It is the men
That have the tragedy in these weather'd lands.

Francis.

No thought of that ! We are monks now. And, indeed,
This is a cloister that a man could like,
This blue-aired space of grassy land, that here,

Just as it touches the sea's bitter mood,
Is troubled into dunes, as it were thrilled,
Like a calm woman trembling against love.

Sylvan.

Woman again !—How, knowing you, I failed
So long to know the truth, I cannot think.

Francis.

And what's the truth ?

Sylvan.

Woman and love of her
Is as a dragging ivy on the growth
Of that strong tree, man's nature !

Valentine.

Yes. But now
Tell us a simpler sort of truth. Was she——

Sylvan.

She ? Who ?

Valentine.

Katrina, of course : who else, when one
Speaks of a she to you ?

Sylvan.

And what about her ?

Valentine.

Was she too cruel to you, or too kind ?

Sylvan.

Ah, there's no hope for men like you ; you're sunk
Above your consciences in smothering ponds
Of sweet imagination,—drowned in woman !

Francis.

Ay? Clarence and the Malmesey over again;
'Twas a delightful death.

Valentine.

But you forget,
Sylvan, we've come as your disciples here.

Sylvan.

Yes, to a land where not the least desire
Need prey upon your mettle. There are hours
A god might gladly take in these basking dunes,—
Nothing but summer and piping larks, and air
All a warm breath of honey, and a grass
All flowers—sweet thyme and golden heart's-ease here!
And under scent and song of flowers and birds,
Far inland out of the golden bays the air
Is charged with briny savour, and whispered news
Gentle as whitening oats the breezes stroke.
What good is all this health to you? You bring
Your own thoughts with you; and they are vinegar,
Endlessly rusting what should be clear steel.

Francis.

I do begin to doubt our enterprise,
The grand Escape from Woman. It lookt brave
And nobly hazardous afar off, to cease
All wenching, whether in deed or word or thought.
And yet I fear pride egged us. We had done
Better to be more humble, and bring here
A girl apiece.

Valentine.

Yes, Sylvan ; you must think
The cloister were a thing more comfortable
With your Katrina in it ?

Sylvan.

My Katrina !
And do you think, supposing I would love,
I'ld bank in such a crazy safe as that
Katrina ? One of those soft shy-spoken maids,
Who are only maids through fear ? Whose life is all
A simpering pretence of modesty ?
If it was love I wanted, 'twould not be
A dish of sweet stewed pears, laced with brandy.
But I can do without a woman's kisses.

Valentine.

Can you ?—You know full well, in the truth of your heart,
That there's no man in all the world of men
Whose will woman's beauty cannot divide
Easily as a sword cuts jetting water.

Sylvan.

Have you not heard, that even jetting water
May have such spouting force, that it becomes
A rod of glittering white iron, and swords
Will beat rebounding on its speed in vain ?—
Of such a force I mean to have my will.

[*He sits and stares moodily out to sea. His companions whisper each other.*

Valentine.

Here, Francis ! Look you yonder. O but this,
This is the joke of the world !

Francis.

Hallo ! a girl !
And, by the Lord, Katrina !—But why here ?

Valentine.

She's followed him, of course ; she's heard of this
Mad escapade and followed after him.

Francis.

She has not seen us yet. Now what to do ?

Valentine.

Quick ! Where's your handkerchief ? Truss his wrists and ankles,
And pull his coat up over his head and leave him !
He won't get free of her again ; she'll lead
His wildness home and keep him tame for ever.
Now !

[*They fall on him, bind him, and blindfold him.*

Sylvan.

What are you doing ? Whatever are you doing ?
Hell burn you, let me go !

Valentine.

There's worse to come.

[*They make off, and leave* Sylvan *shouting.*
Katrina *runs in.*

Katrina.

Dear Heaven! Were they robbers? Have they hurt you?

[*She releases him. He stands up.*

Sylvan.

Katrina!

Katrina.

Sylvan!

Sylvan.

How did you plot this?
I thought I'd put leagues between you and me.

Katrina.

Why have you come here?

Sylvan.

To find you, it seems.
But what you're doing here, that I'ld like to know.

Katrina.

I came to see my grandmother: she lives
All by herself, poor grannam, and it's time
She had some help about the house, and care.

Sylvan.

Let's have a better tale. You followed me.

Katrina.

Sylvan, how dare you make me out so vile?

Sylvan.

How dare you mean to make this body of mine
A thing with no thought in it but your beauty ?

Katrina.

You shall not speak so wickedly. You've had
The half of my truth only : here's the whole.
It was from you I fled ! I hoped to make
My grannam's lonely cottage something safe
From you and what I hated in you.

Sylvan.

Love ?—
Ah, so it's all useless.

Katrina.

I feared to know
You wanted me,—horribly I feared it.
And now you've found me out.

Sylvan.

Is this the truth ?—
No help for it, then.

Katrina.

O, I'm a liar to you !

Sylvan.

Strange how we grudge to be ruled ! rather than be
Divinely driven to happiness, we push back
And fiercely try for wilful misery.—

Dearest, forgive me being cruel to you,
You who are in life like a heavenly dream
In the evil sleep of a sinner.

Katrina.

No, you hate me.

Sylvan (*kissing her*).

Is this like hatred ?

Katrina (*in his arms*).

Sylvan, I have been
So wrencht and fearfully used. It was as if
This being that I live in had become
A savage endless water, wild with purpose
To tire me out and drown me.

Sylvan.

Yes, I know :
Like swimming against a mighty will, that wears
The cruelty, the race and scolding spray
Of monstrous passionate water.

Katrina.

Hold me, Sylvan :
I'm bruised with my sore wrestling.

Sylvan.

Ah, but now
We are not swimmers in this dangerous life.
It cannot beat upon our limbs with surf
Of water clencht against us, nor can waves

Now wrangle with our breath. Out of it we
Are lifted; and henceforward now we are
Sailors travelling in a lovely ship,
The shining sails of it holding a wind
Immortally pleasant, and the malicious sea
Smoothed by a keel that cannot come to wreck.

Katrina.

Alas, we must not stay together here.
Grannam will come upon us.

Sylvan.

Where is she?

Katrina.

Yonder, gathering driftwood for her fire.
There is a little bay not far from here,
The shingle of it a thronging city of flies,
Feeding on the dead weed that mounds the beach;
And the sea hoards there its vain avarice,—
Old flotsam, and decaying trash of ships.
An arm of reef half locks it in, and holds
The bottom of the bay deep strewn with seaweed,
A barn full of the harvesting of storms;
And at full tide, the little hampered waves
Lift up the litter, so that, against the light,
The yellow kelp and bracken of the sea,
Held up in ridges of green water, show
Like moss in agates. And there is no place
In all the coast for wreckage like this bay;
There often will my grannam be, a sack
Over her shoulders, turning up the crust
Of sun-dried weed to find her winter's warmth.

Sylvan.

Is that she coming ?

Katrina.

O Sylvan, has she seen us ?

Sylvan.

What matter if she has ?

Katrina.

But it would matter !

Sylvan.

Katrina, come with me now ! We'll go together
Back to my house.

Katrina.

No, no, not now ! I must
Carry my grannam's load for her : 'tis heavy.

Sylvan.

We must not part again.

Katrina.

No, not for long ;
For if we do, there will be storms again,
I know ; and a fierce reluctance—O, a mad
Tormenting thing !—will shake me.

Sylvan.

Then come now !

Katrina.

Not now, not now! Look how my poor grannam
Shuffles under the weight; she's old for burdens.
I must carry her sack for her.

Sylvan.

Well, to-night!

Katrina.

To-night?—O Sylvan! dare I?

Sylvan.

Yes, you dare!
You will be knowing I'm outside in the darkness,
And you will come down here and give me yourself
Wholly and forever.

Katrina.

O not to-night!

Sylvan.

I shall be here, Katrina, waiting for you.

[*He goes.*

The old woman comes in burdened with her sack.

Grandmother.

Katrina, that was a young man with you.

Katrina.

O grannam, you've had luck to-day; but now
It's I must be the porter.

Grandmother (*giving up the sack*).

Ay, you take it.
It's sore upon my back. You should have care
Of these young fellows ; there's a devil in them.
Never you talk with a man on the seashore
Or on hill-tops or in woods and suchlike places,
Especially if he's one you think of marrying.

Katrina.

Marrying ? I shall never be married !

Grandmother.

Pooh !
That's nonsense.

Katrina.

I should think 'twas horrible
Even to be in love and wanting to give
Yourself to another ; but to be married too,
A man holding the very heart of you,—

Grandmother.

He never does, honey, he never does.—
We're late ; come along home.

II

In SYLVAN'S *house.* SYLVAN *and* KATRINA *talking to each other and betweenwhiles thinking to themselves.*

Sylvan.

How pleasant and beautiful it is to be
At last obedient to love ! (*To know*
Also, I've sold myself,—is that so pleasant ?)

Katrina.

I cannot think, why such a glorious wealth
As this of love on our hearts should be spent.
What have we done, that all this gain be ours ?
(*Nor can I think why my life should be mixt,*
Even its dearest secrecy, with another.)

Sylvan.

Ay, there's the marvel ! If to enter life
Needed some courage, 'twere a kind of wages,
As they let sacking soldiers take home loot :
But we are shuffled into life like puppets
Emptied out of a showman's bag ; and then
Made spenders of the joys current in heaven !
(*Not such a marvel neither, if this love*
Be but the price I'm paid for my free soul.
Who's the old trader that has lent this girl
The glittering cash of pleasure to pay me with ?
Who is it,—the world, or the devil, or God—that wants
To buy me from myself ?)

Katrina.

And then how vain
To think we can hold back from being enricht !
It is not only offered——

Sylvan.

No, 'tis a need
As irresistible within our hearts
As body's need of breathing. (*That I should be*
So avaricious of his gleaming price !)

Katrina.

And the instant force it has upon us, when
We think to use love as a privilege!
We are like bees that, having fed all day
On mountain-heather, go to a tumbling stream
To please their little honey-heated thirsts;
And soon as they have toucht the singing relief,
The swiftness of the water seizes them.

Sylvan.

And onward, sprawling and spinning, they are carried
Down to a drowning pool.

Katrina.

O Sylvan, drowning?
(*Deeper than drowning! Why should it not be*
Our hearts need wish only what they delight in?)

Sylvan.

Well, altogether gript by the being of love.
(*Yes, now the bargain's done; and I may wear,*
Like a cheated savage, scarlet dyes and strings
Of beaded glass, all the pleasure of love!)

Katrina.

It is a wonderful tyranny, that life
Has no choice but to be delighted love!
(*I know what I must do: I am to abase*
My heart utterly, and have nothing in me
That dare take pleasure beyond serving love.
Thus only shall I bear it; and perhaps—
Might I even of my abasement make
A passion, fearfully enjoying it?)

Sylvan.

You are full of thoughts, sweetheart ?

Katrina.

And so are you :
A long while since you kist me ! (*What have I said ?*
O fool so to remind him ! I shall scarce
Help crying out or shuddering this time !—
Ah no ; I am again a fool ! Not thus
I am to do, but in my heart to break
All the reluctance ; it must have on me
No pleasure ; else I am endlessly tortured.)
Then I must kiss you, Sylvan !

[*She kisses him.*

Sylvan.

Ah, my darling !
(*God ! it went through my flesh as thrilling sound*
Must shake a fiddle when the strings are snatcht !
Will she make the life in me all a slave
Of my kist body,—a trembling, eager slave ?
It ran like a terror to my heart, the sense,
The shivering delight upon my skin,
Of her lips touching me.) My beloved,—
It may be it were wise, that we took care
Our pleasant love come never in the risk
Of being too much known.

Katrina.

O what a risk
To think of here ! Love is not common life,
But always fresh and sweet. Can this grow stale ?

[*She kisses him again.*

Sylvan.

O never! I meant not so.—Yes, always sweet!
(*She must not kiss me! Ah, it leaves my heart*
Aghast, and stopt with pain of the joy of her;
And her loved body is like an agony
Clinging upon me. O she must not kiss me!
I will not be a thing excruciated
To please her passion, an anguish of delight!)

PART III

VIRGINITY AND PERFECTION

JUDITH

I

THE BESIEGED CITY OF BETHULIA

JUDITH (*at the window of an upper room of her house*).

This pitiable city !—But, O God,
Strengthen me that I bend not into scorn
Of all this desperate folk ; for I am weak
With pitying their lamentable souls.
Ah, when I hear the grief wail'd in the streets,
And the same breath their tears nigh strangle, used
To brag the God in them inviolate
And fighting off the hands of the heathen,—Lord,
Pardon me that I come so near to scorn ;
Pardon me, soul of mine, that I have loosed
The rigour of my mind and leant towards scorn !—
Friends, wives and husbands, sons and daughters, dead
Of plague, famine, and arrows : and the houses
Battered unsafe by cannonades of stone
Hurled in by the Assyrians : the town-walls
Crumbling out of their masonry into mounds
Of foolish earth, so smitten by the rams :
The hunger-pangs, the thirst like swallowed lime
Forcing them gulp green water maggot-quick

That lurks in corners of dried cisterns : yea,
Murders done for a drink of blood, and flesh
Sodden of infants : and no hope alive
Of rescue from this heat of prisoning anguish
Until Assyrian swords drown it in death ;—
These, and abandoned words like these, I hear
Daylong shrill'd and groan'd in the lanes beneath.
What needeth Holofernes more ? The Jews,
The People of God, the Jews, lament their fortune ;
Their souls are violated by the world ;
Jewry is conquered ; and the crop of men
Sown for the barns of God, is withered down,
Like feeblest grass flat-trodden by the sun,
In one short season of fear. Yea, swords and fire
Can do no more destruction on this folk :
A fierce untimely mowing now befits
This corn incapable of sacred bread,
This field unprofitable but to flame !
What should the choice of God do for a people,
But give them souls of temper to withstand
The trying of the furnace of the world ?—
And they are molten, and from God's device
Unfashion'd, crazed in dismay ; yea, God's skill
Fails in them, as the skill a founder put
In brass fails when the coals seize on his work.
For this fierce Holofernes and his power,
This torture poured on the city, is no more
Than a wild gust of wicked heat breathed out
Against our God-wrought souls by the world's furnace.
No new thing, this camp about the city :
Nebuchadnezzar and his hosted men
But fearfully image, like a madman's dream,

The fierce infection of the world, that waits
To soil the clean health of the soul and mix
Stooping decay into its upward nature.
Soul in the world is all besieged: for first
The dangerous body doth desire it;
And many subtle captains of the mind
Secretly wish against its fortune; next,
Circle on circle of lascivious world
Lust round the foreign purity of soul
For chance or violence to ravish it.
But the pure in the world are mastery.
Divinely do I know, when life is clean,
How like a noble shape of golden glass
The passions of the body, powers of the mind,
Chalice the sweet immortal wine of soul,
That, as a purple fragrance dwells in air
From vintage poured, fills the corrupting world
With its own savour. And here I am alone
Sound in my sweetness, incorrupt; the rest
(They noise it unashamed) are stuff gone sour;
The world has meddled with them. They have broacht
The wine that had pleas'd God to flocking thirst
Of flies and wasps, to fears and worldly sorrows.
Nay, they are poured out into the dung of the world,
And drench, pollute, the fortune of their state,
When they should have no fortune but themselves
And the God in them, and be sealed therein.
Ah, my sweet soul, that knoweth its own sweetness,
Where only love may drink, and only—alas!—
The ghost of love. But I am sweet for him,
For him and God, and for my sacred self!
But hark, a troop of new woe comes this way,

Making the street to ring and the stones wet
With cried despair and brackish agony.

CITIZENS *lamenting in the street below.*

They have crawled back like beasts dying of thirst,
The life all clotted in them. They went out
Soldiers, and back like beaten dogs they came
Breathing in whines, slow maimed four-footed things
On hands and knees degraded, groaning steps.
Their brains were full of battle, they were made
Of virtue, brave men ; now in their brains shudder
Minds that cringe like children burnt with fever.
Often they stood to face the enemies' ranks
All upright as a flame in windless air,
Wearing their arm and the bright skill of swords
Like spirits clad in flashing fire of heaven ;
And now in darken'd rooms they lie afraid
And whimper if the nurse moves suddenly.—
Ah God, that such an irresistible fiend,
Pain, in the beautiful housing of man's flesh
Should sleep, light as a leopard in its hunger,
Beside the heavenly soul ; and at a wound
Leap up to mangle her, the senses' guest !—
That in God's country heathen men should do
This worse than murder on men full of God !

Judith.

What matter of new wailing do your tongues
Wear in this shivering misery of sound ?

A Citizen.

The captains which were chosen to go out
And treat with Holofernes have come back.

Judith.

And did the Ninevite demon treat with them ?

A Citizen.

The words they had from him were flaying knives,
And burning splinters fixt in their skinless flesh,
And stones thrown till their breasts were broken in.

Judith.

What, torture our embassage ?

A Citizen.

Yea, for he means
Nothing but death to all the Jews he takes.

Another.

There was a jeering word tied round the neck
Of each tormented man : " Behold, ye Jews,
These chiefs of yours have learnt to crawl in prayer
Before the god Nebuchadnezzar ; come,
Leave your city of thirst and your weak god,
And learn good worship even as these have learnt."

Another.

I saw them coming in : O horrible !
With broken limbs creeping along the ground—

Judith.

Were I a man among you, I would not stay
Behind the walls to weep this insolence ;
I'ld take a sword in my hand and God in my mind,

And seek under the friendship of the night
That tent where Holofernes' crimes and hate
Sleep in his devilish brain.

A Citizen.

There is no night
Where Holofernes sleeps, as thou couldst tell,
Didst thou not shut thyself up in thine ease
Away from the noise and tears of common woe.
Come to the walls this evening, and I'll show thee
The golden place of light, the little world
Of triumphing glory framed in midst of the dark,
Pillar'd on four great bonfires fed with spice,
Enclosing in a globe of flame the tent
Wherein the sleepless lusts of Holofernes
Madden themselves all night, a revel-rout
Of naked girls luring him as he lies
Filling his blood with wine, the scented air
Injur'd marvellously with piping shrills
Of lechery made music, and small drums
That with a dancing throb drive his swell'd heart
Into desires beyond the strength of man.

Judith.

And this beast is thine enemy, God!

Another Citizen.

Nor beast,
Nor man, but one of those lascivious gods
Our lonely God detests, Chemosh or Baal
Or Peor who goes whoring among women.

Another.

And now come down braving in God's own land,
Pitching the glory of his fearful heaven
All night among God's hills.

Judith.

You fools, he is
A life our God could snap as a woman snaps
Thread of her sewing.

A Citizen.

Who shall break him off,
Who on the earth, from his huge twisted power?

Another.

For in his brain, as in a burning-glass
Wide glow of sun drawn to a pin of fire,
Are gathered into incredible fierceness all
The rays of the dark heat of heathen strength.

Another.

His eyes, they say, can kill a man.

Another.

And sure
No murder could approach his flaming nights.

Another.

Unless it came as a woman at whose beauty
His lust hath never sipt; for into his flesh
To drink unknown desirable limbs as wine
Torments him still, like a thirst when fever pours
A man's life out in drenching sweats.

Judith.

Peace, peace;
The siege hath given you shameless tongues, and minds
No more your own: yea, the foul Ninevite
Hath mastered you already, for your thoughts
Dwell in his wickedness and marvel at it.
Hate not a thing too much, lest you be drawn
Wry from yourselves and close to the thing ye hate.

A Citizen.

We know thy wisdom, Judith; but our lives
Belong to death; and wisdom to a man
Dying, is water in a broken jar.

Judith.

Yea, if thou wilt die of a parching mouth.

A Citizen.

Thou art rich, and thou hast much cool store of wine.
But the town thirsts, and every beat of our blood
Hastens us on to maniac agony.
The Assyrians have our wells, and half the tanks
Are dry, and the pools shoal with baking mud:
The water left to us is pestilent.
And therefore have we asked the governors
For death: and it is granted us.

Another.

Five days
Hath Prince Ozias bidden us endure.

Another.

For there are still fools among us who dare trust
God has not made a bargain of our lives.

Another.

We are a small people, and our war is weak :
Who knows whether our God doth not desire
Armies and great plains full of spears and horses,
And cities made of bronze and hewn white stone
And scarlet awnings, throng'd with sworded men,
To shout his name up from the earth and kill
All crying at the gates of other heavens ;
And hath grown tired of peaceable praise and folk
That in a warren of dry mountains dwell,
Whose few throats can make little noise in heaven.

A Young Man.

For sure God's love hath wandered to strange nations ;
His pleasure in the breasts of Jerusalem
Is a delight grown old. Yea, he would change
That shepherd-woman of the earthly cities,
Whose mind is as the clear light of her hills,
Full of the sound of a hundred waters falling ;
And poureth his desire out, belike,
Upon that queen the wealth of the world hath clad,
Babylon, for whose golden bed the gods
Wrangle like young men with great gifts and boasts ;
Whose mind is as a carbuncle of fire,
Full of the sound of amazing flames of music.

Another.

Yea, what can Israel offer against her,
Whom the rich earth out of her mines hath shod,

And crowned with emeralds grown in secret rocks,
Who on her shoulders wears the gleam of the sea's
Purple and pearls, and the flax of Indian ground
Is linen on her limbs cool as moonlight,
And fells of golden beasts cover her throne ;
Whose passion moves in her thought as in the air
Melody moves of flutes and silver horns :
What can Jerusalem the hill-city
Offer to keep God's love from Babylon ?

Judith.

What but the beauty of holiness, and sound
Of music made by hearts adoring God ?
You that speak lewdly of God, you yet shall see
Jerusalem treading upon her foes.
But what was that of five days one of you spoke ?

A Citizen.

Ozias sware an oath : hast thou not heard ?

Judith.

No, for I keep my mind away from your tongues
Wisely. Who walks in wind-blown dust of streets,
That hath a garden where the roses breathe ?

A Citizen.

I have no garden where the roses breathe ;
I have a city full of women crying
And babies starving and men weak with thirst
Who fight each other for a dole of water.

Another.

Not only thou hast pleasant garden-hours,
Judith, here in Bethulia ; the Lord Death
Has bought the city for his garden-close,
And saunters in it watching the souls bloom
Out of their buds of flesh, and with delight
Smelling their agony.

Another.

But in five days
Either our God will turn his mind to us,
Or, if he careth not for us nor his honour,
Ozias will let open the main gate
And let the Assyrians end our dreadful lives.

Judith.

O I belong to a nation utterly lost !
God ! thou hast no tribe on the earth ; thy folk
Are helpless in the living places like
The ghosts that grieve in the winds under the earth.
Remember now thy glory among the living,
And let the beauty of thy renown endure
In a firm people knitted like the stone
Of hills, no mischief harms of frost or fire ;
But now dust in a gale of fear they are.
They have blasphemed thee ; but forgive them, God ;
And let my life inhabit to its end
The spirit of a people built to God.—
So you have given God five days to come
And help you ? You would make your souls as wares
Merchants hold up to bidders, and say, " God,

Pay us our price of comfort, or we sell
To death for the same coin " ? Five days God hath
To find the cost of Jewry, or death buys you ?

A Citizen.

Here comes Ozias : ask him.

Judith.

Hold him there.

[JUDITH *comes down into the street.*

Ozias.

Judith, I came to speak with thee.

Judith.

And I
Would speak with thee. What tale is this they tell
That thou hast sworn to give this people death ?

Ozias.

In five days those among us who still live
Will have no souls but the fierce anguish of thirst.
If God ere then relieves us, well. If not,
We give ourselves away from God to death.

Judith.

Darest thou do this wickedness, and set
Conditions to the mercy of our God ?

Ozias.

Death hath a mercy equal unto God's.—
Look at the air above thee ; is there sign

Of mercy in that naked splendour of fire ?
Too Godlike ! We are his : he covers us
With golden flame of air and firmament
Of white-hot gold, marvellous to see.
But whom, what heathen land hated of God,
Do his grey clouds shadow with comfort of rain ?
Over our chosen heads his glory glows :
And in five days the torment in his city
Will be beyond imagining. We will go
Through swords into the quiet and cloud of death.

Judith.

Ozias, wilt thou be an infamy ?
Bethulia fallen, all Judea lies
Open to the feet and hoofs of Assyria.

Ozias.

Yea, and what doth Judea but cower down
Behind us ? There's no rescue comes from there.
We are alone with Holofernes' power.

Judith.

But if we hold him off, will he not grant
The meed of a brave fight, captivity ?—
Or we may treat with him, make terms for yielding.

Ozias.

We know his mind : he hath written it plain
In the torn flesh of our ambassadors.
His mind to us is death ; we can but choose
Between sharp swords and the slow slaying of thirst.

Judith.

He may torment us if we yield.

Ozias.

He may.
But not to yield is grisly and sure torment.

Judith.

There must be hope, if we could reckon right!

Ozias.

Well, thou and God have five days more to build
A bridge of hope over our broken world.
And, for the town even now fearfully aches
In scalding thirst, not five days had I granted,
Had it not been for somewhat I must say
Secretly to thee.

Judith.

Secretly? Then here;
Send off these men to labour at their groans
Elsewhere; for not within my house thou comest;
I'll have no thoughts against God in my house.

[Ozias *disperses the citizens.*

Ozias.

Judith, we are two upright minds in this
Herd of grovelling cowardice. We should,
To spiritual vision which can see
Stature of spirit, seem to stand in our folk
Like two unaltered stanchions in the heap
Of a house pulled down by fire. I know thy soul

Tempered by trust in God against this ruin;
But not in God, but in mortality
Thy soul stands founded; and death even now
Is digging at thy station in the world;
And as a man with ropes and windlasses
Pulls for new building columns of wreckt halls
Down with a breaking fall, so death has rigged
His skill about us, so he will break us down,
Ruin our height and courage; and as stone,
Carved with the beautiful pride of kings, hath made,
Hammer'd to rubble and ground for mortar, walls
Of farms and byres, our kill'd and broken natures,
With all their beauty of passion, yea, and delight
In God, death will shape and grind up to new
Housing for souls not royal as we are,
New flesh and mind for mean souls and dull hearts:
For death is only life destroying life
To roof the coming swarms in mortal shelter
Of flesh and mind experienced in joy.

Judith.

Thy specious prologue means no good, I trow.
Thou wert to tell me wherefore for five days
We may pretend to be God's people still;
Why thou didst not make us over to death
Soon as the folk began to wail despair.

Ozias.

This reasoning will tell thee why.—No need,
I think, to bring up into speech the years
Since in the barley-field Manasses lay
Shot by the sun. I tried (nor failed, I think),

To hold thy soul up from its hurt, and be
Somewhat of sight to thee, until thy long
Blind season of disaster should be changed.
Always I have found friendship in thine eyes ;
And pleasant words, and silences more pleasant,
Have made us moments wherein all the world
Left our sequester'd minds ; so that I dared
Often believe our friendliness might be
The brink of love.

Judith.

Stop ! for thou hast enough
Disgraced mine ears.

Ozias.

I pray thee hear me out.
The dream of loving thee and being loved
Hath been my life ; yea, with it I have kept
My heart drugg'd in a long delicious night
Colour'd with candles of imagined sense,
And musical with dreamt desire. I said,
The day will surely come upon the world,
To scatter this sweet night of fantasy
With morning, pour'd on my dream-feasted heart
Out of thine eyes, Judith. And yet I still
Feared for my dream, even as a maiden fears
The body of her lover. But, in the midst
Of all this charm'd delaying,—behold Death
Leapt into our world, lording it, standing huge
In front of the future, looking at us !
Thou seest now why, when the people came
Crying wildly to be given up to death,

I bade them wait five days ?—That I at last
Might stamp the image of my glorious dream
Upon the world, even though it be wax
And the fires are kindling that must melt it out.
Judith, thou hast now five days more to live
This life of beautiful passion and sweet sense :
And now my love comes to thee like an angel
To call thee out of thy visionary love
For lost Manasses, out of ghostly desire
And shadows of dreams housing thy soul, that are
Vainer than mine were, dreams of dear things which death
Hath for ever broken ; and lead thy life
To a brief shadowless place, into an hour
Made splendid to affront the coming night
By passion over sense more grandly burning
Than purple lightning over golden corn,
When all the distance of the night resounds
With the approach of wind and terrible rain,
That march to torment it down to the ground.
Judith, shall we not thus together make
Death admirable, yea, and triumph through
The gates of anguish with a prouder song
Than ever lifted a king's heart, who rode
Back from his war, with nations whipt before him,
Into trumpeting Nineveh ?

Judith.

Thou fool,
Death is nothing to me, and life is all.
But what foul wrong have I done to thee, Ozias,
That thou shouldst go about to put such wrong
Into my life as these defiling words ?

Ozias.

Is it defilement to hear love spoken ?

Judith.

Yes ! thou hast soiled me : to know my beauty,
Wherewith I loved Manasses, and still love,
Has all these years dwelt in thy heart a dream
Of favourite lust,—O this is foul in my mind.

Ozias.

I meant not what thou callest lust, but love.

Judith.

What matters that ? Thou hast desired me.
And knowing that, I feel my beauty clutch
About my soul with a more wicked shame
Than if I lived corrupt with leprosy.

Ozias.

Wilt thou still let the dead have claim on thee ?
Judith, wilt thou be married to a grave ?

Judith.

I am married to my love ; and it is vile,
Yea, it is burning in me like a sin,
That when my love was absent, thy desire
Shouldst trespass where my love is single lord.

Ozias.

This is but superstition. Love belongs
To living souls. It is a light that kills

Shadows and ghosts haunting about the mind.
Yea, even now when death glooms so immense
Over the heaven of our being, Love
Would keep us white with day amid the dark
Down-coming of the storm, till the end took us.
And joy is never wasted. If we love,
Then although death shall break and bray our flesh,
The joy of love that thrilled in it shall fly
Past his destruction, subtle as fragrance, strong
And uncontrollable as fire, to dwell
In the careering onward of man's life,
Increasing it with passion and with sweetness.
Duty is on us therefore that we love
And be loved. Wert thou made to set alight
Such splendour of desire in man, and yet,
For a grave's sake, keep all thy beauty null,
And nothing be of good nor help to thy kind?

Judith.

Help? What help in me?

Ozias.

To let go forth
The joy whereof thy beauty is the sign
Into the mind of man, and be therein
Courage of golden music and loud light
Against his enemies, the eternal dark
And silence.

Judith.

Ah, not thus. Yet—could I not help?—
Why talk we? What thing should I say to thee

To pierce the pride of lust wrapping thy heart ?
How show thee that, as in maidens unloved
There is virginity to make their sex
Shrink like a wound from eyes of love untimely,
So in a woman who hath learnt herself
By her own beauty sacred in the clasp
Of him whom her desire hath sacred made,
There is a fiercer and more virgin wrath
Against all eyes that come desiring her ?

[*A Psalm of many voices strikes their ears, and through the street pass old men chanting, followed and answered by a troop of young men.*

Chorus : Old Men.

Wilt thou not examine our hearts, O Lord God of our strength ?
Wilt thou still be blindly trying us ? Wilt thou not at length
Believe the crying of our words, that never our knees have bent
To foreign gods, nor any Jewish mouth or brain hath sent
Prayers to beseech the favour of abominable thrones
Worshipt by the heathen men with furnaces, wounds, and groans ?

Young Men.

And what good in our lives, strength or delighted glee,
Hath God paid to purchase our purity ?
Though lust starve in our flesh, still he devises fire
To prove our lives pure as his fierce desire.
With huge heathenish tribes roaring exultant here,
Jewry fights as maid with a ravisher :

Tribes who better than we deal with the gods their lords,
For they pleasantly sin, yet the gods sharpen and drive their swords.

Old Men.

Hast thou not tried us enough, Jehovah? Hast thou found any fire
Will draw from our hearts a smoke of burn'd idolatrous desire?
There is none in us, Lord: no other God in us but thee;
Only thy fires make our clean souls glitter with agony.
Pure we are, pure in our prayers, pure our souls look to thee, Lord;
And to be shewn to the world devoured by evil is our reward.

Young Men.

We whose hearts were alone giving our God renown,
Under the wheels of hell we are fallen down!
False the heaven we built, fashion'd of purity;
'Tis heathen heavens, made out of sin, stand high.
Come, make much of our God! Comfort his ears with song,
Lest his pride the gods with their laughter wrong,
Seeing, huddled as beasts held by a fearful night
Full of lions and hunger, his folk crouch to the heathen might.

Old Men.

Jehovah, still we refrain from crying to the infamous gates

That open easily into the heavens thy mind of jealousy hates.
Power is in them: hast thou no power? Wilt thou not beware
Lest thy mood now press our minds to venturous despair?

Young Men.

Fool'd, fool'd, fool'd are our lives, held by the world in jeer;
With crazed eyes we behold veils of enormous fear
Hiding dreadfully those marvellous gates and stairs
Where the heathen delighted with sin throng with their prosperous prayers.

Old Men.

Yea, hung like the front of pestilent winds, thunderous dark before
The way into the heathen heavens, terrible curtains pour,
Webs of black imagination and woven frenzy of sin;
And yet we know power on earth belongs to those within.

Young Men.

Yea, through Jehovah's jealousy,
Burning dimly at last we see
The great brass made like rigid flame,
The gates of the heavens we dare not name.
Take hold of wickedness! Yea, have heart
To tear the darkness of sin apart;
And find, beyond, our comforted sight
Flash full of a glee of fiery light,—
The gods the heathen know through sin,
The gods who give them the world to win!

Judith.

This may I not escape. My world hath need
Of me who still hold God firm in my mind.
It is no matter if I fail: I must
Send the God in me forth, and yield to him
The shaping of whatever chance befall.—
Ozias! hateful thou hast made thyself
To me; for thou hast hatefully soiled my beauty,
My preciousest, given me to attire my soul
For her long marriage festival of life.
Yet I must make request to thee, and thou
Must grant it. When the sun is down to-night,
Quietly set the main gate open: I
Will pass therethrough and treat with Holofernes.

Ozias.

What, wilt thou go to be murdered by these fiends?

Judith.

Ask nothing, but do simply my request.

Ozias.

I will: so thou shalt know the reverent heart
I have for thee, although its worship thou
So bitterly despisest; but thy will
Shall be a sacred thing for me to serve.
Thou hast thy dangerous demand, because
It is thou who askest, it is I who may
Grant it to thee,—this only! Yea, I will send
Thy heedless body among risks that thou,

Looking alone at the great shining God
Within thy mind, seest not; but I see
And sicken at them. Yet do I not require
Thy purpose; whether thy proud heart must have
The wound of death from steel that has not toucht
The peevish misery these Jews call blood;
Whether thy mind is for velvet slavery
In the desires of some Assyrian lord——
Forgive me, Judith! there my love spoke, made
Foolish with injury; and I should be
Unwise to stay here, lest it break the hold
I have it in. I go, and I am humbled.
But thou shalt have thy asking: the gate is thine.
[*He goes.*

Judith.

How can it harm me more, to feel my beauty
Read by man's eyes to mean his lust set forth?
Yea, Holofernes now can bring no shame
Upon me that Ozias hath not brought.
But this is chief: what balance can there be
In my own hurt against a nation's pining?
God hath given me beauty, and I may
Snare with it him whose trap now bites my folk.
There is naught else to think of. Let me go
And set those robes in order which best pleased
Manasses' living eyes; and let me fill
My gown with jewels, such as kindle sight,
And have some stinging sweetness in my hair.—
Manasses, my Manasses, lost to me,
Gone where my love can nothing search, and hidden
Behind the vapours of these worldly years,

The many years between me and thy death;
Thine ears are sealed with immortal blessedness
Against our miserable din of living;
Through thy pure sense goeth no soil of grief.
Forgive me! for thou hast left me here to be hurt
And moved to pity by the dolour of men.
The garment of my soul is splasht with sorrow,
Sorrowful noise and sight; and like to fires
Of venom spat on me, the sorrow eats
Through the thin robe of sense into my soul.
And it is cried against me, this keen anguish,
By my own people and my God's;—and thou
Didst love them. Therefore thou must needs forgive me,
That I devise how this my beauty, this
Sacred to thy long-dead joy of desire,
May turn to weapon in the hand of God;
Such weapon as he hath taken aforetime
To sword whole nations at a stroke to their knees,—
Storms of the air and hilted fire from heaven,
And sightless edge of pestilence hugely swung
Down on the bulk of armies in the night.
Such weapon in God's hand, and wielded so,
A woman's beauty may be now, I pray;
A pestilence suddenly in this foreign blood,
A blight on the vast growth of Assyrian weed,
A knife to the stem of its main root, the heart
Of Holofernes. God! Let me hew him down,
And out of the ground of Israel wither our plague!

II

BEFORE THE TENT OF HOLOFERNES

Holofernes.

Night and her admirable stars again!
And I again envying her and questioning!
What hast thou, Night, achieved, denied to me,
That maketh thee so full of quiet stars?
What beauty has been mingled into thee
So that thy depth burns with the peace of stars?—
I now with fires of uproarious heat,
Exclaiming yellow flames and towering splendour
And a huge fragrant smoke of precious woods,
Must build against thy overlooking, Stars,
And against thy terrible eternal news
Of Beauty that burns quietly and pure,
A lodge of wild extravagant earthly fire;
Even as under passions of fleshly pleasure
I hide myself from my desiring soul.

[*Enter Guards with* JUDITH.

Guard 1.

We found this woman wandering in the trenches,
And calling out, "Take me to Holofernes,
Assyrians, I am come for Holofernes."

Guard 2.

She would not, for no words of ours, unveil,
And something held us back from handling her.

Guard 1.

We think she must be beautiful, although
She is so stubborn with that veil of hers.

Guard 2.

We minded my lord's word, that he be shewn
All the seized women which are strangely fair.

Holofernes.

Take off thy veil.

Judith.

I will not.

Holofernes.

Take thy veil
From off thy face, Jewess, or thou straight goest
To entertain my soldiers.

Judith.

I will not.

Holofernes.

Am I to tear it, then ?

Judith.

My lord, thou durst not.

Holofernes.

Ha, there is spirit here. I have the whim,
Jewess, almost to believe thee : I dare not !
But tell me who thou art.

Judith.

That shalt thou know
Before the night has end.

Holofernes.

Take off thy veil.

Judith.

Alone for Holofernes am I come.

Holofernes.

And there is only Holofernes here.
These fellows are but thoughts of mine ; my whole
Army, that treads down all the earth and breaks
The banks of fending rivers into marsh,
Is nought but my forth-going imagination.
Where I am, there is no man else : if I
Appeared before thee in a throng of spears,
I'ld stand alone before thee, girt about
By powers of my mind made visible.

Judith.

For captured peasants or for captured kings
Such words would have the right big sound. But I
Am woman, and I hear them not : I say
I will not, before any man but thee,
Make known my face ; I am only for thee.
When I have thee alone and in thy tent
I will unveil.

Holofernes (*to the Guards*).

What ! Staring ?—Hence, you dogs !

III

IN THE TENT OF HOLOFERNES

Holofernes (*alone with Judith*).

Thou art the woman! Thou hast come to me!—
O not as I thought! not with senses blazing
Far into my deep soul abiding calm
Within their glory of knowledge, as the vast
Of night behind her outward sense of stars.
Now am I but the place thy beauty brightens,
And of myself I have no light of sense
Nor certainty of being: I am made
Empty of all my wont of life before thee,
A vessel where thy splendour may be poured,
After the way the great vessel of air
Accepts the morning power of the sun.
Now nothing I have known of me remains,
Save that within me, far as the world is high
Beneath this dawn that gilds my spirit's air,
Some depth, more inward even than my soul,
Troubles and flashes like the shining sea.
O Jewish woman, if thou knewest all
The hunger and the tears the punisht world
Suffers by cause of thee, and of my dream
That thou wert somewhere hidden in mankind!
I could not but obey my dream, and toil
To break the nations and to sift them fine,
Pounding them with my warfare into dust,
And searching with my many iron hands

Through their destruction as through crumbs of marl,
Until my palms should know the jewel-stone
Betwixt them, the Woman who is Beauty,—
Nature so long hath like a miser kept
Buried away from me in this heap of Jews!
Now that we twain might meet, women and men
In every land where I have felt for thee
Have taken desolation for their home,
Crying against me,—and against thee unknowing.
Ah, but I had given over to despair
The mind in me. I ground the stubborn tribes,
I quarried them like rocks and broke them small
And ground them down to flinders and to sands;
But never gleamed the jewel-stone therein,
Naught but the common flint of earth I found.
And in a dreary anger I kept on
Assailing the whole kind of man, because
Some manner of war my soul must needs inhabit.
Like a man making himself in drunken sleep
A king, my soul, drunk with its earthly war,
Kept idle all its terrible want of thee,
Believed itself managing arms with God;
Yea, when my trampling hurry through the earth
Made cloudy wind of the light human dust,
I thought myself to move in the dark danger
Of blinding God's own face with blasts of war!
Until my rage forgot his crime against me,
His hiding thee, the beauty I had dreamt.
Yea and I filled my flesh with furious pleasure,
That in the noise of it my soul should hear
No whispering thought of desperate desire.
Nevertheless, I knew well that my heart's

Sightless imagination lifted his face
Continually awake for news of thee.
But 'twas infirm and crazy waking, like
As when a starving sentry, put to guard
The sleep of a broken soldiery that flees
Through winter of wild hills from hounding foes,
Hath but the pain of frozen wounds, and fear
Feeding on his dark spirit, to watch withal.
And lo,
As suddenly, as blessedly thou comest
Now to my heart's unseeing watch for thee,
As out of the night behind him into the heart,
Drugg'd senseless with its ache, of that lost soldier
An arrow leaps, and ere the stab can hurt,
His frozen waking is the ease of death.
So I am killed by thee ; all the loud pain
Of pleasure that had lockt my heart in life,
Wherein with blinded and unhearing face
My hope of thee yet stood and strained to look
And listen for thy coming,—all this life
Is killed before thee ; yea, like marvellous death,
Spiritual sense invests my heart's desire ;
And round the quiet and content thereof,
The striving hunger of my fleshly sense
Fails like a web of hanging cloth in fire.—
Tell me now, if thou knowest, why thou hast come !

Judith.

Sufficeth not for us that I have come ?—
Let not unseemly things live in my mouth ;
Yet I would praise thee as thou praisest me,
But in a manner that my people use,

Things to approach in song they list not speak.
And song, thou knowest, inwrought with chiming strings,
Sweetens with sweet delay loving desire :
Also thine eyes will feed, and thy heart wonder.—

Balkis was in her marble town,
And shadow over the world came down.
Whiteness of walls, towers and piers,
That all day dazzled eyes to tears,
Turned from being white-golden flame,
And like the deep-sea blue became.
Balkis into her garden went ;
Her spirit was in discontent
Like a torch in restless air.
Joylessly she wandered there,
And saw her city's azure white
Lying under the great night,
Beautiful as the memory
Of a worshipping world would be
In the mind of a god, in the hour
When he must kill his outward power ;
And, coming to a pool where trees
Grew in double greeneries,
Saw herself, as she went by
The water, walking beautifully,
And saw the stars shine in the glance
Of her eyes, and her own fair countenance
Passing, pale and wonderful,
Across the night that filled the pool.
And cruel was the grief that played
With the queen's spirit ; and she said :
" What do I hear, reigning alone ?
For to be unloved is to be alone.

There is no man in all my land
Dare my longing understand;
The whole folk like a peasant bows
Lest its look should meet my brows
And be harmed by this beauty of mine.
I burn their brains as I were sign
Of God's beautiful anger sent
To master them with punishment
Of beauty that must pour distress
On hearts grown dark with ugliness.
But it is I am the punisht one.
Is there no man, is there none,
In whom my beauty will but move
The lust of a delighted love;
In whom some spirit of God so thrives
That we may wed our lonely lives?
Is there no man, is there none?"—
She said, "I will go to Solomon."

Holofernes.

I shall not bear it: dreamed, it hath made my life
Fail almost, like a storm broken in heaven
By its internal fire; and now I feel
Love like a dreadful god coming to do
His pleasure on me, to tear me with his joy
And shred my flesh-wove strength with merciless
Utterance through me of inhuman bliss.—
I must have more divinity within me.—
Come to me, slave! [*Calling out to his attendants.*

Judith.

Thou callest someone? Alas!
O, where's my veil?—Cry him to stay awhile!—

Holofernes.

Thou troubled with such whimsy !—But 'tis no one,
A mere sexless thing of mine.

Judith.

He is coming !
I threw my veil—where ?—I must bow my face
Close to the ground, or his eyes will find me out ;
And—O my lord, hold him back with thy voice !
[*She has knelt down.*
Hold him in doubt to enter a moment, while
I loosen my hair into some manner of safety
Against his prying.

Holofernes.

Slave, dost thou hear me ? Come !—
I marvel, room for such a paltering mood
Should be within thy mind, now so nearly
Deified with the first sense of my love.
[*A Eunuch comes in.*

Holofernes.

Wine ! The mightiest wine my sutlers have ;
Wine with the sun's own grandeur in it, and all
The wildness of the earth conceiving Spring
From the sun's golden lust : wine for us twain !
And when thou hast brought it, burn anear my bed
Storax and cassia ; and let wealth be found
To cover my bed with such strife of colour,
Crimson and tawny and purple-inspired gold,
That eyes beholding it may take therefrom
Splendid imagination of the strife
Of love with love's implacable desire.

Judith (*still kneeling*).

I must lean on thee now, my God! A weight
Of pitiable weakness thou must bear
And move as it were thine own strength; tell my heart
How not to sicken in abomination,
Show me the way to loathe this vile man's rage,
Now close to seize me into the use of his pleasure,
With the loathing that is terrible delight.
So that not fainting, but refresht and astonisht
And strangely spirited and divinely angry
My body may arise out of its passion,
Out of being enjoyed by this fiend's flesh.
Then man my arm; then let mine own revenge
Utter thy vengeance, Lord, as speech doth meaning;
Yea, with hate empower me to say bravely
The glittering word that even now thy mind
Purposes, God,—the swift stroke of a falchion!

Holofernes.

Woman, beloved, why art thou fixt so long
Kneeling and downward crookt, and in thy hair
Darkened?—Ah, thy shoulders urging shape
Of loveliness into thy hair's pouring gleam!

Judith.

Needs must I pray my Jewish God for help
Against my bridal joys. For I do fear them.

Holofernes.

I also: these are the joys that fear doth own.

IV

At the Gate of Bethulia. On the walls, on either side of the Gate, are citizens watching the Assyrian camp; OZIAS *also, standing by himself.*

Ozias.

When wilt thou cure thyself, spirit of the earth,
When wilt thou cure thyself of thy long fever,
That so insanely doth ferment in thee?—
'Tis not man only: the whole blood of life
Is fever'd with desire. But as the brain,
Being lord of the body, is served by blood
So well that a hidden canker in the flesh
May send, continuous as a usury,
Its breeding venom upward, till in the brain
It vapour into enormity of dreaming:
So man is lord of life upon the earth;
And like a hastening blood his nature wells
Up out of the beasts below him, they the flesh
And he the brain, they serving him with blood;
And blood so loaden with brute lust of being
It steams the conscious leisure of man's thought
With an immense phantasma of desire,
An unsubduable dream of unknown pleasure;
Which he sends hungering forth into the world,
But never satisfied returns to him.
Who hath found beauty? Who hath not desired it?
'Tis but the feverish spirit of earthly life
Working deliriously in man, a dream

Questing the world that throngs upon man's mind
To find therein an image of herself;
And there is nothing answers her entreaty.—
I climb towards death: it is not falling down
For me to die, but up the event of the world
As up a mighty ridge I climb, and look
With lifted vision backward down on life.
So high towards death I am gone, listless I gaze
Where on the earth beneath me, into the fires
Of that Assyrian strength, our siege of fate,
Judith, the dream of my desire of beauty,
Goes daring forth, to shape herself therein,
Seeking to fashion in its turbulence
Some deed that will be likeness of herself.
For now I know her purpose: and I know
She will be murdered there. Against the world
The beauty I have lived in, my loved dream,
Goes, wild to master the world; and she will
Therefore be murdered. It is nothing now;
Wind from the heights of death is on my brow.

Talk among the other watchers.

It must be, God is for us. Such a mind
As this of Judith's could not be, unless
God had spoken it into her. She is
His special voice, to tell the Assyrians
Terrible matters.

Is she God's? I think
'Tis Holofernes hath her now.

If not,
Upon his soldiers he hath lavisht her.

Not he. Now they have known her, his filled senses
Never will leave go our wonderful Judith.

Ay, wonderful in Jewry. But there are
In Babylon women so beautiful,
They make men's spirits desperate, to know
Flesh cannot ever minister enough
Delight to ease the craving they are taskt with.

Who talks of Babylon when God even now
Is training her fierce champion, Holofernes,
Into the death a woman holds before him ?

A woman killing Holofernes !

Ay ;
Be she abused by him or not, I know
God means to give her marvellous hands to-night.
I know it by my heart so strangely sick
With looking out for the first drowsy stir
In that huge flaming quiet of the camp.
Now fearfuller qualm than famine eagerly
Handles my life and pulls at it,—my faith's
Hunger for being fed with sounds and visions :
The firelight mixt with a trooping bustle of shadows,
The silence suddenly shouting with surprise,
That tells of men astounded out of sleep
To find that God hath dreadfully been among them.

We have mistaken Judith.

Even as now
God is mistaken by your doubting hearts.

She that has dealt with such a pride of spirit
In all her ways of life, so that she seemed
To feel like shadow, falling on the light
Her own mind made, the common thoughts of men;
Ay, she that to-day came down into our woe
And stood among the griefs that buzz upon us,
Like one who is forced aside from a bright journey
To stoop in a small-room'd cottage, where loud flies
Pester the inmates and the windows darken;
This she, this Judith, out of her quiet pride,
And out of her guarded purity, to walk
Where God himself from violent whoredom could
Scarcely preserve her shuddering flesh! and all
For our sake, for the lives she hath in scorn,
This horrible Assyrian risk she ventures.

There should be prayer for that. Let us ask God
To bind the men, whose greed now glares upon her,
In some strange feebleness; surely he will;
Surely not with woman's worst injury
Her noble obedience he will reward!
Let us ask God to bind these men before her.

They are not his to bind: else, were they here?
They are the glorying of Nebuchadnezzar's
Heart of fury against our God, sent here
Like insolent shouting into his holy quiet.
God could not bind these bragging noises up

In Nebuchadnezzar's heart; it is not his,
But made by Babylonian gods or owned
By thrones that hold the heavens over Nineveh.
For all these outland greatnesses, these kings
Whose war goes pealing through the world, these towns
Infidel and triumphant, reaching forth
Armies to hug the world close to their lust,—
What are they but the gods making a scorn
Of our God on the earth? Then how can he
Alter these men from wicked delight? or how
Keep Judith all untoucht among their hands,
When his own quietness he could not keep
Unbroken by the god's Assyrian insult?

But with a thunder he can shatter this
Intruding noise, and make his quiet again.

And in their lust he can entangle them,
Deceiving them far into Judith's beauty,
Which is his power, and lop them from their gods.

Their outrage will be ornament upon her!

Out of the hands of the goblins she will come
Not markt with shame, but wearing their vile usage
Like one whom earthly reign covers with splendour.

The ignominy they thought of shall be turned
To shining, yea, to announcing through the world
How God hath used her to beguile the heathen.

It begins! Now it begins! Lo, how dismay
Is fallen on the camp in a strange wind:
The ground, that seemed as spread with yellow embers,
Leaps into blazing, and like cinders whirled
And scattered up among the flames, are black
Bands of frantic men flickering about!

Ozias! seest thou how our enemies
Are labouring in amazement? How they run
Flinging fuel to light them against fear?

Now they begin to roar their terror: now
They wave and beckon wordless desperate things
One to another.

Hear the iron and brass
Ringing above their voices, as they snatch
The arms that seem to fight among themselves,
Seized by their masters' anguish; dost thou hear
The clumsy terror in the camp, the men
Hasting to arm themselves against our God,
Ozias?

Ozias.

Lions have taken a sentinel.

A Citizen.

Judith hath taken Holofernes.

Judith's voice outside, under the gate.

Yea,
And brought him back with her. Open the gates

The Citizens.

Open the gates. Bring torches. Wake, ye Jews!
Hail, Judith, marvellously chosen woman!
How bringst thou Holofernes? Show him to us.

Judith.

Dare you indeed behold him?

A Citizen.

Is he bound?

Judith.

Drugged rather, with a medicine that God
Prepared for him and gave into my hands.
Open the gates! It is a harmless thing,
The Holofernes I have made your show;
You may gaze blithely upon him. I have tamed
The man's pernicious brain. Open the gates!
What, are your hands still nerveless? But my hands,
The hands of a woman, have done notable work.

The Gates open. JUDITH *appears, standing against the night and the Assyrian fires. Torches and shouting in the town.*

Citizens.

Judith! Judith alone! Where is thy boast
Of Holofernes captured?

Judith.

I am alone,
Indeed; and you are many; yet with me
Comes Holofernes, certainly a captive.

Ozias.

What trifle is this ?

Judith.

Trifle ? It is the word.
A trifle, a thing of mere weight, I have brought you
From the Assyrian camp. My apron here
Is loaded now more heavily, but as meanly
As an old witch's skirt, when she comes home
From seeking camel's-dung for kindling ; yet
My burden was, an hour ago, the world
Where you were ground to tortures ; it was the brain
Inventing your destruction.—Look you now !

[*Holding up the head of* HOLOFERNES.

This is the mouth through which commandment came
Of massacre and damnation to the Jews ;
Here was the mind the gods that hate our God
Used to empower the agonies they devised
Against us ; here your dangers were all made,
Your horrible starvation ; and the thirst
Those wicked gods supposed would murder you,
Here a creature became, a ravenous creature ;
Yea, here those mighty vigours lived which took,
Like ocean water taking frost, the hate
Those gods have for Jehovah, shaping it
Atrociously into the war that clencht
Their fury about you, frozen into iron.
Jews, here is the head of Holofernes : take it
And let it grin upon our highest wall
Over against the camp of the Assyrians.

[*She throws them the head*

Ay, you may worry it ; now is the jackals' time ;
Snarl on your enemy, now he is dead.

Ozias.

Judith, be not too scornful of their noise.
There are no words may turn this deed to song :
Praise cannot reach it. Only with such din,
Unmeasured yelling exultation, can
Astonishment speak of it. In me, just now,
Thought was the figure of a god, firm standing,
A dignity like carved Egyptian stone ;
Thou like a blow of fire hast splinter'd it ;
It is abroad like powder in a wind,
Or like heapt shingle in a furious tide,
Thou having roused the ungovernable waters
My mind is built amidst, a dangerous tower.
My spirit therein dwelling, so overwhelmed
In joy or fear, disturbance without name,
Out of the rivers it is fallen in
Can snatch no substance it may shape to words
Answerable to thy prowess and thy praise.
We are all abasht by thee, and only know
To worship thee with shouts and astounded passion.

Judith.

Yes, now the world has got a voice against me :
At last now it may howl a triumph about me.

Ozias.

This, nevertheless, my thought can seize from out
The wildness that goes pouring past it. God,

Wondrously having moved thee to this deed,
Hath shown the Jews a wondrous favouring love.
Thee it becomes not, standing though thou art
On this high action, to think scorn of men
Whom God thinks worthy of having thee for saviour.

Judith.

This is a subtle flattery. What know I
Of whom God loves, of whom God hates? I know
This only: in my home, in my soul's chamber,
A filthy verminous beast hath made his lair.
I let him in; I let this grim lust in;
Not only did not bolt my doors against
His forcing, but even put them wide and watcht
Him coming in, to make my house his stable.
What though I killed him afterward? All my place,
And all the air I live in, is foul with him.
I killed him? Truly, I am mixt with him;
Death must have me before it hath all him.

Ozias.

In thee, too, are the floods, the wild rivers,
Overrunning thy thought, the nameless mind?
How else, indeed? Nay, we are dull with joy:
Of thee we thought not, out of the hands of outrage
Coming back, although with victory coming.
But this makes surety once more of my thought,
And gives again my reason its lost station;
For it may come now in my privilege
(A thing that could cure madness in my brain)
That thou from me persuasion hast to endure
What well I know thy soul, thy upright soul,

Feels as abominable harness on it
Fastening thee unwillingly to crime,—
The wickedness that hath delighted in thee.

Judith.

Ay? Art thou there already? Tasting, art thou,
What the Assyrians may have forced on me,
Ere thou hast well swallowed thy new freedom?
Indeed, I know this is the wine of the feast
Which I have set for thee and thy Bethulia;
And 'tis the wine makes delicate the banquet.

Ozias.

Wait: listen to me. 'Tis I now must be wise
And thou the hearkener. Not without wound
(So I make out, at least, thy hurrying words)
Comest thou back to us from conquering.
And such a wound, I easily believe,
As eats into thy soul and rages there;
Yea, I that know thee, Judith, know thy soul
Worse rankling hath in it from heathen insult
Than flesh could take from steel bathed in a venom
Art magic brewed over a charcoal fire,
Blown into flame by hissing of whipt lizards.
Yet is it likely, by too much regarding,
Thy hurt is pamper'd in its poisonous sting.
Wounds in the spirit need no surgery
But a mind strong not to insist on them.
See, then, thou hast not too much horror of this;
Who that fights well in battle comes home sound?—
Much less couldst thou, who must, with seeming weakness,
Invite the power of Holofernes forth

Ere striking it, thy womanhood the ambush.
For thou didst plan, I guess, to duel him
In snares, weaving his greed about his limbs,
Drawn out and twisted winding round his strength
By ministry of thy enticing beauty;
That when he thought himself spending on thee
Malicious violence, and thou hadst made him
Languish, stupid with boasting and delight,
Thy hands might find him a tied quiet victim
Under their anger, maiming him of life.
Now, thy device accomplisht, wilt thou grudge
Its means? Wilt thou scruple to understand
Thy abus'd sex will show upon thy fame
A nobler colour of glory than a soldier's
Wounded bravery rusting his habergeon?
Nay, will not the world rejoice, thou being found
Among its women, ready such insolence
To bear as is unbearable to think on,
Thereby to serve and save God and his people?

Judith.

The world rejoice over me? Yea, I am certain.

Ozias.

Then art thou too fastidious. It is weak
To make thyself a shame of being injured;
And is it injury indeed? Nay, is it
Anything but a mere opinion hurt?
Not thou, but customary thought is here
Molested and annoyed; the only nerve
Can carry anguish from this to thy soul,
Is that credulity which ties the mind

Firmly to notional creature as to real.
Advise thee, then ; dark in thyself keep hid
This grief ; and thou wilt shortly find it dying.

A Citizen.

Judith,
Pardon our ecstasy. 'Tis time thou hadst
Our honour. But first tell us all the event,
That in thy proper height thou with thy deed
May stand against our worship.

Judith.

Why do you stop
Your shouts, and glare upon me ? Have you need
Truly to hear my tale ? I think, not so.
Ozias here, as he hath whiled at ease
Upon the walls my stay in the camp yonder,
Hath fairly fancied all that I have done,
And more exactly, and with a relishing gust,
All that was done to me. Ask him, therefore ;
If he hath not already entertained
Your tedious leisure with my story told
Pat to your liking, enjoyed, and glosst with praise.—
And yet, why ask him ? Why go even so far
To hear it ? Ask but the clever libidinousness
Dwelling in each of your hearts, and it will surely
Imagine for you how I trained to my arms
Lewd Holofernes, and kept him plied with lust,
Until his wild blood in the end paused fainting,
And he lay twitching, drained of all his wits ;—
But there was wine as well working in him,
Feebling his sinews ; 'twas not all my doing,

The snoring fit that came before his death,
The routing beastly slumber that was my time.
You know it all! Why ask me for the tale?

Ozias.

Comfort her: praise her. She is strangely ashamed
Of Holofernes having evilly used her.

A Citizen.

We will contrive the triumph of our joy
Into some tune of words, and bring thee on,
Accompanied by singing, to thy house.

Judith.

I pray you, rather let me go alone.
You will do better to be searching out
All sharpen'd steel that may take weapon-use.
The Assyrians are afraid: it is your time.

[*They surround* JUDITH *and go with her.*

CHORUS *of Citizens praising* JUDITH *and leading her to her house.*

Over us and past us go the years;
Like wind that taketh sound from jubilee
And aloud flieth ringing,
Over us goeth the speed of the years,
Like loud noise eternally bringing
The greatness women have done.
Deborah was great; with her singing
She hearten'd the men that the horses had dismayed;
Deborah, the wife of Lapidoth, alone

Stood singing where the men were horribly afraid,
Singing of God in the midst of fear;
When archers out of Hazor were
Eating the land like grasshoppers,
And darkness at noon was plundering the air
Of the light of the sun's insulted fires,
Red darkness covering Sisera's host
As Jewry was covered by the Canaanite's boast:
For the earth was broken into dust beneath
The force of his chariots' thundering tyres,
Nine hundred chariots of iron.
  Deborah was great in her prophesying;
But, though her anger moved through the Israelites,
And the loose tribes her indignant crying
Bound into song, fashion'd to an army;
And before the measure of her song went flying,
Like leaves and breakage of the woods
Fallen into pouring floods,
The iron and the men of Sisera and Jabin;
Not by her alone
God's punishment was done
On Canaan intending a monstrous crime,
On the foaming and poison of the serpent in Hazor;
Two women were the power of God that time.
  Yea, and sullenly down
Into its hiding town,
Even though the lightning were still in its heart,
The broken dragon, drawing in its fury,
Had croucht to mend its shatter'd malice,
Had lifted its head again and spat against God.
But God its endlessly devising brain,
Its braving spirit, its captain Sisera,

Into the hands of another woman brought :
In nets of her persuasion
She that wild spirit caught,
She fasten'd up that uncontrollable thought.
Sisera spake, and the crops were flames ;
Sisera lookt, and blood ran down the door-sills.
But weary, trusting his entertainment,
He came to Jael, the Kenite woman ;
A woman who gave him death for a bed,
And with base tools nailed down his murderous head
Fast to the earth his rage had fed
With men unreckonably slain.
  But than these wonderfully greater,
Judith, art thou ;
The praise of both shall follow like a shadow
After thy glory now,
Who alone the measureless striding,
The high ungovern'd brow,
Of Assur upon the hills of the world
Hast tript and sent him hugely sliding,
Like a shot beast, down from his towering,
By his own lamed
Mightiness hurl'd
To lie a filth in disaster.
Deborah and Jael, famously named,
Like rich lands enriching the city their master,
Bring thee now their most golden honour.
For the beauty of thy limbs was found
By a dreadfuller enemy dreadful as the sound
Of Deborah's singing, though hers was a song
That had for its words thousands of men.
But thou thyself, looking upon them,

Didst weaken the Assyrians mortally.
They thought it terrible to see thee coming;
They falter'd in their impiousness,
Their hearts gave in to thee; they went
Backward before thee and shewed thee the tent
Where Holofernes would have thee in to him,
Yea, for his slayer waiting,
Waiting thee to entertain,
Desiring thee, his death, to enjoy, as Jael
Waited for Sisera her slain.

Judith.

Have done! Do you think I know not why your souls
Are so delighted round me? Do you think
I see not what it is you praise?—not me,
But you yourselves triumphing in me and over me.

A Citizen.

Did we kill Holofernes?

Judith.

No: nor I.
That corpse was not his death. He is alive,
And will be till there is no more a world
Filled with his hidden hunger, waiting for souls
That ford the monstrous waters of the world.
Alive in you is Holofernes now,
But fed and rejoicing; I have filled your hunger.
Yea, and alive in me: my spirit hath been
Enjoyed by the lust of the world, and I am changed
Vilely by the vile thing that clutcht on me,
Like sulphurous smoke eating into silver.

Your song is all of this, this your rejoicing;
You have good right to circle me with song!
You are the world, and you have fed on me.

A Citizen.

We are the world; yes, but the world for ever
Honouring thee.

Judith.

How am I honoured so,
If I no honour have for the world, but rather
Hold it an odious and traitorous thing,
That means no honour but to those whose spirits
Have yielded to its ancient lechery?—
Defiled, defiled!

A Citizen.

Thou wert moved by our grief:
Was that a vile thing?

Judith.

That was the cunning world.
It moved me by your grief to give myself
Into the pleasure of its ravenous love.

A Citizen.

Judith, if thy hot spirit beareth still
Indignant suffering of villainy,
Think, that thou hast no wrong from it. Such things
Are in themselves dead, and have only life
From what lives round them. And around thee glory
Lives and will force its splendour on the harm

Thy purity endured, making it shine
Like diamond in sunlight, as before
Unviolated it could not.

Judith.

Ay, to you
I doubt not I seem admirable now,
Worthy of being sung in loudest praise:
But to myself how seem I?

A Citizen.

Surely as one
Whose charity went down the stairs of hell,
And barter'd with the fiends thy sacredest
For our deliverance.

Judith.

And that you praise!—
I was a virgin spirit. Whence I come
I know not, and I care not whither I go.
One fearful knowledge holds me: that I am
A spirit walking dangerously here.
For the world covets me. I am alone,
And made of something which the world has not,
Unless its substance can devour my spirit.
And it hath devoured me! In Holofernes
It seized me, fed on me; and then gibed on me,
With show of his death scoffing at my rage,—
His death!—He lay there, drunken, glutted with me,
And his bare falchion hung beside the bed.—
Look on it, and look on the blood I made
Go pouring thunder of pleasure through his brain!—
And like a mad thing hitting at the madness

Thronging upon it in a grinning rout,
I my defilement smote, that Holofernes.
But does a maniac kill the frenzy in him,
When with his fists he beats the clambering fiends
That swarm against his limbs ? No more did I
Kill my defilement ; it was fast within me ;
And like a frenzy can go out of me
And dress its hideous motions in my world.
For when I come back here, behold the thing
I murdered in the camp leaps up and yells !
The carrion Holofernes, my defilement,
Dances a triumph round me, roars and rejoices,
Quickened to hundreds of exulting lives.

A Citizen.

God help thee in this wildness ! Are we then
As Holofernes to thee ?

Judith.

You are naught
But the defilement that is in me now,
Rejoicing to be lodged safely within me.
You are the lust I entertained, rejoicing
To wreak itself upon my purity.
The stratagems of my ravishment you are,
Rejoicing that the will you serve has dealt
Its power on me. O, I hate you not.
You and your crying grief should have blown past
My heart like wind shaking a fasten'd casement.
But I must have you in. Myself I loathe
For opening to you, and thereby opening
To the demon which had set you on to whine

Pitiably in the porches of my spirit.
You are but noise; but he is the lust of the world,
The infinite wrong the spirit, the virgin spirit,
Must fasten against, or be for ever vile.

A Citizen.

But is it naught that we, the folk of God,
Are safe by thee?

Judith.

God hath his own devices.
But I would be God's helper! I would be
Known as the woman whom his strength had chosen
To ruin the Assyrians!—O my God,
How dreadfully thou punishest small sins!
If it is thou who punishest; but rather
It is that, when we slacken in perceiving
The world's intent towards us, and fatally,
Enticed out of suspicion by fair signs,
Go from ignoring its proposals, down
To parley,—thou our weakness dost permit.
In all my days I from the greed of the world
Virginal have kept my spirit's dwelling,—
Till now; yea, all my being I have maintained
Sacredly my own possession; for love
But made more beautiful and more divine
My spirit's ownership. And yet no warning,
When I infatuate went down to be
Procuress of myself to the world's desire,
Did God blaze on my blindness, no rebuke.
Therefore I am no more my virgin own,
But hatefully, unspeakably, the world's.

To these now I belong; they took me and used me.
I have no pride to live for; and why else
Should one stay living, if not joyfully proud?
For I have yielded now; mercilessly
What is makes foolish nothing of what was.
To know the world, for all its grasping hands,
For all its heat to utter its pent nature
Into the souls that must go faring through it,
Availing nothing against purity,
Made always like rebellion trodden under,—
By this was life a noble labour. Now
I have been persuaded into the world's pleasure:
And now at last I will all certainly
Contrive for myself the death of Holofernes.

[Ozias *comes behind her and catches the lifted falchion.*

Judith.

It was well done, Ozias.

Ozias.

I have watcht
Thy anguish growing, and I lookt for this.

Judith.

Thou knowest me better than I know myself.
What moves in me is strange and uncontrolled,
That once I thought was ruled: thou knew'st me better.—
Indeed thou must forgive me; what was I
To take so bitterly thy suit? What right
Had I to give thee anger, when thou wouldst

Brighten thy hopeless death with me enjoyed,
I, even from that anger, going to be
Holofernes' pleasure ?—Thou knewest me better,
And therefore shalt forgive me. Ay, no doubt
My spirit answered thee so fiercely then
Because it felt thee reading me aright,
How a mere bragging was my purity.
But now to pardon askt, I must add thanks.—
I had forgot Manasses ! Even love
Was driven forth of me by these loud mouths !
Whether in death he waits for me, I know not ;
But it had been an unforgivable thing
To have made this the end ; not to have gone
To death as unto spousals, leaving life
As one sets down a work faithfully done,
And knows oneself by service justified,
Worthy of love, whether love be or not.
But, soiled with detestation, to have thrown
Fiercely aside the garment of this light ;
Proved at the last impatient, death desiring
Like a mere doffing of foul drenchèd clothes ;
Release from the wicked hindering mire of sorrow ;
A comfortable darkness hiding me
Out of the glowing world myself have made
An insult, domineering me with splendour ;—
O such a death had turned, past all forgiving,
My insult to Manasses, and searcht him out,
Even where he is quiet, with the blaze,
Ranging like din, of this contempt, this triumph.
Not crying out such hateful news should I
Flee hunted into death, unto my love.
From this, Ozias, thou hast saved me. Now

I am to learn my shame, that not amazed,
But practised in my burden, I at last,
When my time comes, may all in gladness fare
The road made sacred by Manasses' feet.

[JUDITH *goes into her house.*

Ozias (*addressing the citizens*).

You do well to be stricken silent here.
Terrible Holofernes slain by a woman
Was something wonderful, to be noised aloud;
But this is a wonder past applauding thought,
This grief darkening Judith, in the midst
Of the new shining glory she herself
Has brought to conquer in our skies the storm.
You do well to be dumb: for you have seen
Virginity. That spirit you have seen,
Seen made wrathfully plain that secret spirit,
Whereby is man's frail scabbard filled with steel.
This, cumbered in the earthen kind of man,
Which ceaseless waters would be wearing down,
Alone giveth him stubborn substance, holds him
Upright and hard against impious fate.
All things within it would the world possess,
And have them in the tide of its desire:
Man hath his nature of the vehement world;
He is a torrent like the stars and beasts
Flowing to answer the fierce world's desire.
But like a giant wading in the sea
Stands in the rapture, and refusing it,
And looking upward out of it to find
Who knows what sign?—spirit, virginity;
A power caught by the power of the world;

The spirit in whose unknown hope doth man
Deny the mastery of his fortune here ;
Virginity, whose pride, impassion'd only
To be as she herself would be, nor thence
To loosen for the world's endeavouring,
And, though all give the rash obedience, stand
Her own possession,—this virginity,
This pride of the spirit, asking no reward
But to be pride unthrown, this is the force
Whereby man hath his courage in the strange
Fearful turmoil of being conscious man.
Yea, worshipping this spirit, he will at last
Grow into high divine imagination,
Wherein the envious wildness of the world
Yieldeth its striving up to him, and takes
His mind, building the endless stars like stone
To house his towering joy of self-possessing.
This made you dumb ; ignorant knowledge of this,
Blind vision of virginity's mightiness,
Did chide the exclamation in your hearts.
And think not you have seen, in Judith's grief,
Virginity drown'd in the pouring world.
For what is done is naught ; what is, is all :
And Judith is virginity's appointed.
Even by her injury she showeth us,
As fire by violence may be revealed,
How sovereign is virginity.—
But let us now consult what way her grief,
Which is not to be understood by us,
May spend itself, with naught to urge its power.
Let us within our walls keep close this tale,
Close as the famine and the thirst were kept

Devouring us by the Assyrians.
Let there be no news going through the land
Out of Bethulia but this: that we
At Judith's hands had our deliverance,
But she from Holofernes and his crew
Unwilling and astonisht reverence,
As they were men with minds opprest by God.

THE ETERNAL WEDDING

He.

Even as a wind that hasteth round the world
From out cold hours fill'd with shadow of earth,
To pour alight against the risen sun ;
So unto thee adoring, out of its shadow
Floweth my spirit, into the light of thee
Which Beauty is, and Joy. From my own fate,
From out the darkness wherein long I fared
Worshipping stars and morsels of the light,
Through doors of golden morning now I pass
Into the great whole light and perfect day
Of shining Beauty, open to me at last.
Yea, into thee now do I pass, beloved :
Beauty and thou are mine !

She.

And I am thine !
I am desirable to my desire :
Thence am I clean as immortality
With Beauty and Joy, the fiery power of Beauty.

He.

And by my spirit made marvellous here by thee,
Poured out all clear into the gold of thee,
Not myself only do I know ; I have
Golden within me the whole fate of man :

That every flesh and soul belongs to one
Continual joyward ravishment, whose end
Is here, in this perfection. Now I know—
For all my speculation soareth up,
A bird taking eternity for air,—
Now being mixt with thee, in the burning midst
Of Beauty for my sense and mind and soul,—
That life hath highest gone which hath most joy.
For like great wings forcefully smiting air
And driving it along in rushing rivers,
Desire of joy beats mightily pulsing forward
The world's one nature, and all the loose lives therein,
Carried and greatly streaming on a gale
Of craving, swept fiercely along in beauty;—
Like a great weather of wind and shining sun,
When the airs pick up whole huge waves of sea,
Crumble them in their grasp and high aloft
Sow them glittering, a white watery dust,
To company with light: so we are driven
Onward and upward in a wind of beauty,
Until man's race be wielded by its joy
Into some high incomparable day,
Where perfectly delight may know itself,—
No longer need a strife to know itself,
Only by its prevailing over pain.

She.

Beloved, but no pain may strive with us.

He.

No, for we are flown far ahead of life:
The feet of our Spirit have wonderfully trod

The dangers of the rushing fate of life,
As summer-searching birds tread with their wings
Mountainous surges in the air. But many,
Not strongly fledge to ride the world's great rapture,
Must break, down fallen into steep confusion,
Where we climb easily and tower with joy.
Nevertheless doth life foretell in us
How it shall all make seizure at the last
Upon this height of ecstasy, this fort
Life like an army storms: Captains we are
In the great assault; and where we stand alone
Within these hours, built like establisht flames
Round us, at long last all man's life shall stand
At peace with joy, wearing delighted sense
As meadows wear their golden pleasure of flowers.
Certain my heart dwells in these builded hours,
That there is no more beauty beyond thee.
Thou art my utter beauty; and—behold
The marvel, God in Heaven!—I am thine.
Therefore we know, in this height-guarded place
Whereto the speed of our desire hath brought us;
Here in this safety crowning, like a fort
Built upon topmost peaks, the height of beauty,—
We know to be glad of life as we were gods
Timelessly glad of deity; yea, to enjoy
Fleshly, spiritual Being till the swift
Torrent of glee (as hurled star-dust can change
Dim earthly weather to a moment like the sun,)
Doth startle life to self-adoring godhead,—
Divine body of Power and divine
Burning soul of Light and self-desire.
And having given ourselves all to amazement,

We are made like a prophesying song
Of life all joy, a bride in the arms of God.—
Yea, God shall marry his people at the last;
And every man and woman who has sworn
That only joy can make this Being sacred,
Weaves at the wedding-garment.

She.

Ah, my beloved,
Feelest thou too that out of earth and time
We are transgressing into Heavenly hours?
Or, threading the dark worldly multitude
And making lightning of its path, there comes
A zeal from God posting along our lives.

He.

For some eternal pulse hath chosen us,
Some divine anger beats within our hearts.

She.

Anger? But how far off is love from anger!

He.

Nay, both belong to joy; joy's kind is twain.
And close as in the pouring of sun-flame
Are mingled glory of light and fury of heat,
Joy utters its twin radiance, love and anger;
If joy be not indeed all sacred wrath
With circumstance; indignant memory
Of what hath been, when the new lusts of God
Exulted unimaginably, before
Rigours of law fastened like creeping habit

Upon their measureless wont, and forced them drive
Their ranging music of delighted being
Through the fixt beating tune of a circling world.—
Is not love so? Amazement of an anger
Against created shape and narrowness?
The bound rage of the uncreated Spirit
Whose striving doth impassion us and the world?
A wrath that thou and I are not one being?

She.

Yes, and not only words that thou and I
Out of our sexes with a flame's escape
Are fashioned into one. The Spirit in us
Hath, like imagination in a prison,
Kindled itself free of all boundary,
So that it hath no room but its own joy,
Ample as at the first, before it fell
Into this burthenous habit of a world.
What have we now to do with the world? We are
Made one unworldly thing; we are past the world;
Yea, and unmade: we are immortality.

He.

And only fools abominably crazed,
Those who will set imagination down
As less in truth than their dim sensual wit,
Dare doubt that, while these dreams of ours, these bodies,
Still quiver in the world each with its own
Delight, the great divine wrath of our love
Hath stricken off from us the place of the world!
Yea, as we walk in spiritual freedom
Upright before the shining face of God,

Behold, as it were the shadow of our stature
Thrown by that light, we draw the world behind us,—
That world wherein, darkly I remember,
We thought we were as twain.

She.

Yet, since God means
That love should sunder our fixt separateness
And make our married spirits leap together,
As lightning out of the clouds of sexual flesh,
Into one sexless undivided joy;
Why hath he made us a divided flesh?
We being single ecstasy, now as strange
As if a shadow stained where no one stood
The ground in the noon-glare, seemeth to me
The long blind time wherein our lives and the world
Lay stretcht out dark upon the light of heaven,
Like shadow of some bulk that took the glory;
While yet there stood not over it, to shade
The splendour from it, our heaven-fronting love,
This great new soul that our two souls have kindled.
Yea, and how like, that in the world's chance-medley
This our exulting destiny had been slain,
Though here it lords the world as a man his shadow!

He.

But the world is not chance, except to those
Most feeble in desire: who needeth aught
Shall have it, if he fill his soul with the need.
While still our ignorant lives were drowned beneath
The flooding of the earthly fate, and chance
Seemed pouring mightily dark and loud between us,

Unspeakable news oft visited our hearts:
We knew each other by desire; yea, spake
Out of the strength of darkness flowing o'er us,
Across the hindering outcry of the world
One to another sweet desirable things.
Until at last we took such heavenly lust
Of those unheard messages into our lives,
We were made abler than the worldly fate.
We held its random enmity as frost
The storming Northern seas, and fastened it
In likeness of our love's imagining;
Or as a captain with his courage holds
The mutinous blood of an army aghast with fear,
And maketh it unwillingly dare his purpose,
Our lust of love struck its commandment deep
Into the froward turbulence of world
That parted us. Suddenly the dark noise
Cleft and went backward from us, and we stood
Knowing each other in a quiet light;
And like wise music made of many strings
Following and adoring underneath
Prevailing song, fate lived beneath our love,
Under the masterful excellent silence of it,
A multitudinous obedience.

She.

Yea, but not this my marvel: not that we
Should master with desire the sundering world,
We who bore in our hearts such destiny,
There was no force knew to be dangerous
Against it, but must turn its malice clean
Into obsequious favour worshipping us.

Rather hath this astonisht me, that we
Have not for ever lived in this high hour.
Only to be twin elements of joy
In this extravagance of Being, Love,
Were our divided natures shaped in twain;
And to this hour the whole world must consent.
Is it not very marvellous, our lives
Can only come to this out of a long
Strange sundering, with the years of the world between us?

He.

Shall life do more than God? for hath not God
Striven with himself, when into known delight
His unaccomplisht joy he would put forth,—
This mystery of a world sign of his striving?
Else wherefore this, a thing to break the mind
With labouring in the wonder of it, that here
Being—the world and we—is suffered to be!—
But, lying on thy breast one notable day,
Sudden exceeding agony of love
Made my mind a trance of infinite knowledge.
I was not: yet I saw the will of God
As light unfashion'd, unendurable flame,
Interminable, not to be supposed;
And there was no more creature except light,—
The dreadful burning of the lonely God's
Unutter'd joy. And then, past telling, came
Shuddering and division in the light:
Therein, like trembling, was desire to know
Its own perfect beauty; and it became
A cloven fire, a double flaming, each

Adorable to each ; against itself
Waging a burning love, which was the world ;—
A moment satisfied in that love-strife
I knew the world !—And when I fell from there,
Then knew I also what this life would do
In being twain,—in being man and woman !
For it would do even as its endless Master,
Making the world, had done ; yea, with itself
Would strive, and for the strife would into sex
Be cloven, double burning, made thereby
Desirable to itself. Contrivèd joy
Is sex in life ; and by no other thing
Than by a perfect sundering, could life
Change the dark stream of unappointed joy
To perfect praise of itself, the glee that loves
And worships its own Being. This is ours !
Yet only for that we have been so long
Sundered desire : thence is our life all praise.—
But we, well knowing by our strength of joy
There is no sundering more, how far we love
From those sad lives that know a half-love only,
Alone thereby knowing themselves for ever
Sealed in division of love, and therefore made
To pour their strength out always into their love's
Fierceness, as green wood bleeds its hissing sap
Into red heat of a fire ! Not so do we :
The cloven anger, life, hath left to wage
Its flame against itself, here turned to one
Self-adoration.—Ah, what comes of this ?
The joy falters a moment, with closed wings
Wearying in its upward journey, ere
Again it goes on high, bearing its song,

Its delight breathing and its vigour beating
The highest height of the air above the world.

She.

What hast thou done to me !—I would have soul,
Before I knew thee, Love, a captive held
By flesh. Now, inly delighted with desire,
My body knows itself to be nought else
But thy heart's worship of me ; and my soul
Therein is sunlight held by warm gold air.
Nay, all my body is become a song
Upon the breath of spirit, a love-song.

He.

And mine is all like one rapt faculty,
As it were listening to the love in thee,
My whole mortality trembling to take
Thy body like heard singing of thy spirit.

She.

Surely by this, Beloved, we must know
Our love is perfect here,—that not as holds
The common dullard thought, we are things lost
In an amazement that is all unware ;
But wonderfully knowing what we are !
Lo, now that body is the song whereof
Spirit is mood, knoweth not our delight ?
Knoweth not beautifully now our love,
That Life, here to this festival bid come
Clad in his splendour of worldly day and night,
Filled and empower'd by heavenly lust, is all
The glad imagination of the Spirit ?

He.

Were it not so, Love could not be at all:
Nought could be, but a yearning to fulfil
Desire of beauty, by vain reaching forth
Of sense to hold and understand the vision
Made by impassion'd body,—vision of thee!
But music mixt with music are, in love,
Bodily senses; and as flame hath light,
Spirit this nature hath imagined round it,
No way concealed therein, when love comes near,
Nor in the perfect wedding of desires
Suffering any hindrance.

She.

Ah, but now,
Now am I given love's eternal secret!
Yea, thou and I who speak, are but the joy
Of our for ever mated spirits; but now
The wisdom of my gladness even through Spirit
Looks, divinely elate. Who hath for joy
Our Spirits? Who hath imagined them
Round him in fashion'd radiance of desire,
As into light of these exulting bodies
Flaming Spirit is uttered?

He.

Yea, here the end
Of love's astonishment! Now know we Spirit,
And Who, for ease of joy, contriveth Spirit.
Now all life's loveliness and power we have
Dissolved in this one moment, and our burning

Carries all shining upward, till in us
Life is not life, but the desire of God,
Himself desiring and himself accepting.
Now what was prophecy in us is made
Fulfilment: we are the hour and we are the joy,
We in our marvellousness of single knowledge,
Of Spirit breaking down the room of fate
And drawing into his light the greeting fire
Of God,—God known in ecstasy of love
Wedding himself to utterance of himself.

MARRIAGE SONG

I

Come up, dear chosen morning, come,
Blessing the air with light,
And bid the sky repent of being dark :
Let all the spaces round the world be white,
And give the earth her green again.
Into new hours of beautiful delight,
Out of the shadow where she has lain,
Bring the earth awake for glee,
Shining with dews as fresh and clear
As my beloved's voice upon the air.
For now, O morning chosen of all days, on thee
A wondrous duty lies :
There was an evening that did loveliness foretell ;
Thence upon thee, O chosen morn, it fell
To fashion into perfect destiny
The radiant prophecy.
For in an evening of young moon, that went
Filling the moist air with a rosy fire,
I and my beloved knew our love ;
And knew that thou, O morning, wouldst arise
To give us knowledge of achieved desire.
For, standing stricken with astonishment,
Half terrified in the delight,

Even as the moon did into clear air move
And made a golden light,
Lo there, croucht up against it, a dark hill,
A monstrous back of earth, a spine
Of hunchèd rock, furred with great growth of pine,
Lay like a beast, snout in its paws, asleep ;
Yet in its sleeping seemed it miserable,
As though strong fear must always keep
Hold of its heart, and drive its blood in dream.
Yea, for to our new love, did it not seem,
That dark and quiet length of hill,
The sleeping grief of the world ?—Out of it we
Had like imaginations stept to be
Beauty and golden wonder ; and for the lovely fear
Of coming perfect joy, had changed
The terror that dreamt there !
And now the golden moon had turned
To shining white, white as our souls that burned
With vision of our prophecy assured :
Suddenly white was the moon ; but she
At once did on a woven modesty
Of cloud, and soon went in obscured :
And we were dark, and vanisht that strange hill.
But yet it was not long before
There opened in the sky a narrow door,
Made with pearl lintel and pearl sill ;
And the earth's night seem'd pressing there,—
All as a beggar on some festival would peer,—
To gaze into a room of light beyond,
The hidden silver splendour of the moon.
Yea, and we also, we
Long gazed wistfully

Towards thee, O morning, come at last,
And towards the light that thou wilt pour upon us soon!

II

O soul who still art strange to sense,
Who often against beauty wouldst complain,
Doubting between joy and pain:
If like the startling touch of something keen
Against thee, it hath been
To follow from an upland height
The swift sun hunting rain
Across the April meadows of a plain,
Until the fields would flash into the air
Their joyous green, like emeralds alight;
Or when in the blue of night's mid-noon
The burning naked moon
Draws to a brink of cloudy weather near,
A breadth of snow, firm and soft as a wing,
Stretcht out over a wind that gently goes,—
Through the white sleep of snowy cloud there grows
An azure-border'd shining ring,
The gleaming dream of the approaching joy of her;—
What now wilt thou do, Soul? What now,
If with such things as these troubled thou wert?
How wilt thou now endure, or how
Not now be strangely hurt?—
When utter beauty must come closer to thee
Than even anger or fear could be;
When thou, like metal in a kiln, must lie
Seized by beauty's mightily able flame;
Enjoyed by beauty as by the ruthless glee

Of an unescapable power;
Obeying beauty as air obeys a cry;
Yea, one thing made of beauty and thee,
As steel and a white heat are made the same!
—Ah, but I know how this infirmity
Will fail and be not, no, not memory,
When I begin the marvellous hour.
This only is my heart's strain'd eagerness,
Long waiting for its bliss.—
But from those other fears, from those
That keep to Love so close,
From fears that are the shadow of delight,
Hide me, O joys; make them unknown to-night!

III

Thou bright God that in dream camest to me last night,
Thou with the flesh made of a golden light,
Knew I not thee, thee and thy heart,
Knew I not well, God, who thou wert?
Yea, and my soul divinely understood
The light that was beneath thee a ground,
The golden light that cover'd thee round,
Turning my sleep to a fiery morn,
Was as a heavenly oath there sworn
Promising me an immortal good:
Well I knew thee, God of Marriages, thee and thy flame!
Ah, but wherefore beside thee came
That fearful sight of another mood?
Why in thy light, to thy hand chained,

Towards me its bondage terribly strained,
Why came with thee that dreadful hound,
The wild hound Fear, black, ravenous and gaunt ?
Why him with thee should thy dear light surround ?
Why broughtest thou that beast to haunt
The blissful footsteps of my golden dream ?—
All shadowy black the body dread,
All frenzied fire the head,—
The hunger of its mouth a hollow crimson flame,
The hatred in its eyes a blaze
Fierce and green, stabbing the ruddy glaze,
And sharp white jetting fire the teeth snarl'd at me,
And white the dribbling rage of froth,—
A throat that gaped to bay and paws working violently,
Yet soundless all as a winging moth ;
Tugging towards me, famishing for my heart ;—
Even while thou, O golden god, wert still
Looking the beautiful kindness of thy will
Into my soul, even then must I be,
With thy bright promise looking at me,
Then bitterly of that hound afraid ?—
Darkness, I know, attendeth bright,
And light comes not but shadow comes :
And heart must know, if it know thy light,
Thy wild hound Fear, the shadow of love's delight.
Yea, is it thus ? Are we so made
Of death and darkness, that even thou,
O golden God of the joys of love,
Thy mind to us canst only prove,
The glorious devices of thy mind,
By so revealing how thy journeying here
Through this mortality, doth closely bind

Thy brightness to the shadow of dreadful Fear ?—
Ah no, it shall not be ! Thy joyous light
Shall hide me from the hunger of fear to-night.

IV

For wonderfully to live I now begin :
So that the darkness which accompanies
Our being here, is fasten'd up within
The power of light that holdeth me ;
And from these shining chains, to see
My joy with bold misliking eyes,
The shrouded figure will not dare arise.
For henceforth, from to-night,
I am wholly gone into the bright
Safety of the beauty of love :
Not only all my waking vigours plied
Under the searching glory of love,
But knowing myself with love all satisfied
Even when my life is hidden in sleep ;
As high clouds, to themselves that keep
The moon's white company, are all possest
Silverly with the presence of their guest ;
Or as a darken'd room
That hath within it roses, whence the air
And quietness are taken everywhere
Deliciously by sweet perfume.

EPILOGUE

EPILOGUE

What shall we do for Love these days?
How shall we make an altar-blaze
To smite the horny eyes of men
With the renown of our Heaven,
And to the unbelievers prove
Our service to our dear god, Love?
What torches shall we lift above
The crowd that pushes through the mire,
To amaze the dark heads with strange fire?
I should think I were much to blame,
If never I held some fragrant flame
Above the noises of the world,
And openly 'mid men's hurrying stares,
Worshipt before the sacred fears
That are like flashing curtains furl'd
Across the presence of our lord Love.
Nay, would that I could fill the gaze
Of the whole earth with some great praise
Made in a marvel for men's eyes,
Some tower of glittering masonries,
Therein such a spirit flourishing
Men should see what my heart can sing:
All that Love hath done to me
Built into stone, a visible glee;

Marble carried to gleaming height
As moved aloft by inward delight;
Not as with toil of chisels hewn,
But seeming poised in a mighty tune.
For of all those who have been known
To lodge with our kind host, the sun,
I envy one for just one thing:
In Cordova of the Moors
There dwelt a passion-minded King,
Who set great bands of marble-hewers
To fashion his heart's thanksgiving
In a tall palace, shapen so
All the wondering world might know
The joy he had of his Moorish lass.
His love, that brighter and larger was
Than the starry places, into firm stone
He sent, as if the stone were glass
Fired and into beauty blown.
  Solemn and invented gravely
In its bulk the fabric stood,
Even as Love, that trusteth bravely
In its own exceeding good
To be better than the waste
Of time's devices; grandly spaced,
Seriously the fabric stood.
But over it all a pleasure went
Of carven delicate ornament,
Wreathing up like ravishment,
Mentioning in sculptures twined
The blitheness Love hath in his mind;
And like delighted senses were
The windows, and the columns there

Made the following sight to ache
As the heart that did them make.
Well I can see that shining song
Flowering there, the upward throng
Of porches, pillars and windowed walls,
Spires like piercing panpipe calls,
Up to the roof's snow-cloud flight ;
All glancing in the Spanish light
White as water of arctic tides,
Save an amber dazzle on sunny sides.
You had said, the radiant sheen
Of that palace might have been
A young god's fantasy, ere he came
His serious worlds and suns to frame ;
Such an immortal passion
Quiver'd among the slim hewn stone.
And in the nights it seemed a jar
Cut in the substance of a star,
Wherein a wine, that will be poured
Some time for feasting Heaven, was stored.
  But within this fretted shell,
The wonder of Love made visible,
The King a private gentle mood
There placed, of pleasant quietude.
For right amidst there was a court,
Where always muskèd silences
Listened to water and to trees ;
And herbage of all fragrant sort,—
Lavender, lad's-love, rosemary,
Basil, tansy, centaury,—
Was the grass of that orchard, hid
Love's amazements all amid.

Jarring the air with rumour cool,
Small fountains played into a pool
With sound as soft as the barley's hiss
When its beard just sprouting is ;
Whence a young stream, that trod on moss,
Prettily rimpled the court across.
And in the pool's clear idleness,
Moving like dreams through happiness,
Shoals of small bright fishes were ;
In and out weed-thickets bent
Perch and carp, and sauntering went
With mounching jaws and eyes a-stare ;
Or on a lotus leaf would crawl,
A brinded loach to bask and sprawl,
Tasting the warm sun ere it dipt
Into the water ; but quick as fear
Back his shining brown head slipt
To crouch on the gravel of his lair,
Where the cooled sunbeams broke in wrack,
Spilt shatter'd gold about his back.
So within that green-veiled air,
Within that white-walled quiet, where
Innocent water thought aloud,—
Childish prattle that must make
The wise sunlight with laughter shake
On the leafage overbowed,—
Often the King and his love-lass
Let the delicious hours pass.
All the outer world could see
Graved and sawn amazingly
Their love's delighted riotise,
Fixt in marble for all men's eyes ;

But only these twain could abide
In the cool peace that withinside
Thrilling desire and passion dwelt;
They only knew the still meaning spelt
By Love's flaming script, which is
God's word written in ecstasies.
And where is now that palace gone,
All the magical skill'd stone,
All the dreaming towers wrought
By Love as if no more than thought
The unresisting marble was?
How could such a wonder pass?
Ah, it was but built in vain
Against the stupid horns of Rome,
That pusht down into the common loam
The loveliness that shone in Spain.
But we have raised it up again!
A loftier palace, fairer far,
Is ours, and one that fears no war.
Safe in marvellous walls we are;
Wondering sense like builded fires,
High amazement of desires,
Delight and certainty of love,
Closing around, roofing above
Our unapproacht and perfect hour
Within the splendours of love's power.

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